THE LETTER

A Play in Three Acts

By

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BY W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Characters

Robert Crosbie
Howard Joyce
Geoffrey Hammond
John Withers
Ong Chi Seng
Chung Hi
Leslie
Mrs Joyce
Mrs. Parker
A Sikh Sergeant of Police, A Chinese Woman, Chinese Boys and Malay Servants

The action takes place on a plantation in the Malay Peninsula and at Singapore.

THE LETTER

ACT ONE

Scene: *The scene is the sitting-room of the Crosbies' bungalow. Along the whole back of the scene runs the verandah, which is approached by steps from the garden. The room is comfortably but quite simply furnished with rattan chairs, in which are cushions; there are tables with bowls of flowers on them and pieces of Malay silver. On the walls are water-colour pictures, and here and there an arrangement of krises and parangs; there are horns of sladang and a couple of tigers' heads. Rattan mats on the floor. On the cottage piano a piece of music stands open. The room is lit by one lamp and this stands by a little table on which is* Leslie's *pillow lace. Another lamp hangs in the centre of the verandah.*

When the Curtain rises the sound of a shot is heard and a cry from Hammond. *He is seen staggering towards the verandah.* Leslie *fires again.*

Hammond

Oh, my God!

(He falls in a heap on the ground. Leslie *follows him, firing, and then, standing over him, fires two or three more shots in rapid succession into the prostrate body. There is a little click as she mechanically pulls the trigger. The six chambers are empty. She looks at the revolver and lets it drop from her hand; then her eyes fall on the body, they grow enormous, as though they would start out of her head, and a look of horror comes into her face. She gives a shudder as she looks at the dead man and then, her gaze still fixed on the dreadful sight, backs into the room. There is an excited jabbering from the garden and* Leslie *gives a start as she hears it. It is immediately followed by the appearance of the* Head-Boy *and another, and then while they are speaking, two or three more appear. These are Chinese and wear white trousers and singlets, the others are Malays in sarongs. The* Head-Boy *is a small fat Chinaman of about forty.)*

Head-Boy

Missy! Missy! Whatchee matter? I hear gun fire. *(He catches sight of the body.)* Oh!

(The Boy *with him speaks to him excitedly in Chinese.)*

Leslie

Is he dead?

Head-Boy

Missy! Missy! Who kill him? *(He bends over and looks at the corpse.)* That Mr. Hammond.

Leslie

Is he dead?

(The Head-Boy *kneels down and feels the man's face. The others stand round and chatter among themselves.)*

Head-Boy

Yes, I think him dead.

Leslie

Oh, my God!

Head-Boy

(Getting up.) Missy, what for you do that?

Leslie

Do you know where the Assistant District Officer lives?

Head-Boy

Mr. Withers, Missy? Yes, I savvy. He live jolly long way from here.

Leslie

Fetch him.

Head-Boy

More better we wait till daylight, Missy.

Leslie

There's nothing to be frightened of. Hassan will drive you over in the car. Is Hassan there?

Head-Boy

Yes, Missy. *(He points to one of the Malays.)*

Leslie

Wake Mr. Withers and tell him to come here at once. Say there's been an accident and Mr. Hammond's dead.

Head-Boy

Yes, Missy.

Leslie

Go at once.

(The Head-Boy *turns to* Hassan *the chauffeur and gives him instructions in Malay to get the car out.* Hassan *goes down the verandah steps.)*

Head-Boy

I think more better we bring body in, Missy, and put him on bed in spare room.

Leslie

(With a broken cry of anguish.) No.

Head-Boy

No can leave him here, Missy.

Leslie

Don't touch it. When Mr. Withers comes he'll say what's to be done.

Head-Boy

All right, Missy, I tell Ah Sing to wait here maybe.

Leslie

If you like. . . . I want Mr. Crosbie sent for.

Head-Boy

Post office all closed up, Missy, no can telephone till to-mollow morning.

Leslie

What's the time?

Head-Boy

I think, maybe, twelve o'clock.

Leslie

You must wake the man up at the post office as you go through the village, and he must get on to Singapore somehow or other. Or try at the police station. Perhaps they can get on.

Head-Boy

All light, Missy. I try.

Leslie

Give the man two or three dollars. Whatever happens they must get on to him at once.

Head-Boy

If I catchee speak master, what thing I say, Missy?

Leslie

I'll write the message down for you.

Head-Boy

All light, Missy. You write.

(She sits down at a table and takes a sheet of paper and tries to write.)

Leslie

Oh, my hand! I can't hold the pencil. *(She beats with her fist on the table in anger with herself, and takes the pencil again. She writes a few words and then gets up, paper in hand.)* Here's the message. That's the telephone number. Master is spending the night at Mr. Joyce's house.

Head-Boy

I savvy. The lawyer.

Leslie

They must ring and ring till they get an answer. They can give the message in Malay if they like. Read it and see if you understand.

Head-Boy

Yes, Missy, I understand.

Leslie

(Reading.) Come at once. There's been a terrible accident. Hammond is dead.

Head-Boy

All light, Missy.

(There is the sound of a car being started.)

Leslie

There's the car. Be quick now.

Head-Boy

Yes, Missy.

(He goes out by the verandah.)

*(*Leslie *stands for a moment looking down at the floor. One or two Malay* Women *come softly up the steps. They look at the corpse and in whispers talk excitedly to one another.* Leslie *becomes conscious of their presence.)*

Leslie

What do you want? Go away. All of you.

(They fade away silently and only Ah Sing*, a Chinese boy, is left.* Leslie *gives the body a long look, then she goes into a room at the side, her own bedroom, and you hear the door locked.* Ah Sing *comes into the room, takes a cigarette out of a box on the table and lights it; he sits down on the armchair, with one leg crossed over the other, and blows the smoke into the air.)*

The Curtain Falls

(There is an interval of one minute to mark the passing of three hours.)

(The scene is the same as before. When the Curtain rises, John Withers *is walking up and down the room. The body has been removed. The* Head-Boy *comes in.)*

Head-Boy

My believe I hear motor car on road.

*(*Withers *goes to the verandah and listens.)*

Withers

I don't. *(Irritably.)* I can't imagine why he's so long. *(There is the faint toot of a motor horn.)* Yes, by George! That's a car. Thank the Lord for that.

*(*John Withers *is a young man, neatly dressed in a white duck suit. His topee is on a table. He goes to the door of* Leslie's *room and knocks.)*

Withers

Mrs. Crosbie. *(There is no answer and he knocks again.)* Mrs. Crosbie.

Leslie

Yes?

Withers

There's a car on the road. That must be your husband.

(There is no reply to this. He listens for a moment and then with a gesture of impatience moves over to the verandah. The sound is heard of a motor arriving. It stops.)

Is that you, Crosbie?

Crosbie

Yes.

Withers

Thank God. I thought you were never coming.

*(*Crosbie *comes up the verandah steps. He is a man of powerful build, forty years old, with a large, sun-burned face; he is dressed in khaki shorts, a shirt without a tie, a khaki coat and a broad-brimmed hat.)*

Crosbie

Where's Leslie?

Withers

She's in her room. She's locked herself in. She wouldn't see me till you came.

Crosbie

What's happened? *(He goes to the door of* Leslie's *room and knocks urgently.)* Leslie, Leslie!

(There is a moment's pause. Joyce *comes up the steps. He is a thin, spare, clean-shaven man of about five and forty. He wears ducks and a topee. He holds out his hand to* Withers.*)*

Joyce

My name is Joyce. Are you the A.D.O.?

Withers

Yes. Withers.

Joyce

Crosbie was spending the night with us. I thought I'd better come along with him.

Crosbie

Leslie! It's me! Open the door!

Withers

(To Joyce.*)* Oh, are you the lawyer?

Joyce

Yes. Joyce and Simpson.

Withers

I know.

(The door of Leslie's *room is unlocked and slowly opened. She comes out, and, closing it behind her, stands against it.)*

Crosbie

(Stretching out his hands as though to take her in his arms.) Leslie.

Leslie

(Warding him off with a gesture.) Oh, don't touch me.

Crosbie

What's happened? What's happened?

Leslie

Didn't they tell you over the telephone?

Crosbie

They said Hammond was killed.

Leslie

(Looking towards the verandah.) Is he there still?

Withers

No. I had the body taken away.

(She looks at the three men with haggard eyes and then throws back her head.)

Leslie

He tried to rape me and I shot him.

Crosbie

Leslie!

Withers

My God!

Leslie

Oh, Robert, I'm so glad you've come.

Crosbie

Darling! Darling!

(She throws herself in his arms and he clasps her to his heart. Now at last she breaks down and sobs convulsively.)

Leslie

Hold me tight. Don't let me go. I'm so frightened. Oh, Robert, Robert.

Crosbie

It'll be all right. There's nothing to be frightened about. Don't let yourself go to pieces.

Leslie

I've got you, haven't I? Oh, Robert, what shall I do? I'm so unhappy.

Crosbie

Sweetheart!

Leslie

Hold me close to you.

Withers

Do you think you could tell us exactly what happened?

Leslie

Now?

Crosbie

Come and sit down, dear heart. You're all in. *(He leads her to a chair and she sinks into it with exhaustion.)*

Withers

I'm afraid it sounds awfully brutal, but my duty is . . . .

Leslie

Oh, I know, of course. I'll tell you everything I can. I'll try to pull myself together. *(To* Crosbie*.)* Give me your hankie. *(She takes a handkerchief out of his pocket and dries her eyes.)*

Crosbie

Don't hurry yourself, darling. Take your time.

Leslie

(Forcing a smile to her lips.) It's so good to have you here.

Crosbie

It's lucky Howard came along.

Leslie

Oh, Mr. Joyce, how nice of you! *(She stretches out her hand.)* Fancy your coming all this way at this time of night!

Joyce

Oh, that's all right.

Leslie

How's Dorothy?

Joyce

Oh, she's very well, thank you.

Leslie

I feel so dreadfully faint.

Crosbie

Would you like a drop of whiskey?

Leslie

(Closing her eyes.) It's on the table.

*(*Crosbie *goes and mixes her a small whiskey and seltzer. She is lying on a long chair with her eyes closed, her face pale and wan.)*

Joyce

(In an undertone to Withers*.)* How long have you been here?

Withers

Oh, an hour or more. I was fast asleep. My boy woke me up and said the Crosbies' head-boy was there and wanted to see me at once.

Joyce

Yes.

Withers

Of course I jumped up. He was on the verandah. He told me Hammond had been shot, and asked me to come at once.

Joyce

Did he tell you she'd shot him?

Withers

Yes. When I got here Mrs. Crosbie had locked herself in her room and refused to come out till her husband came.

Joyce

Was Hammond dead?

Withers

Oh, yes, he was just riddled with bullets.

Joyce

(In a tone of faint surprise.) Oh!

Withers

(Taking it out of his pocket.) Here's the revolver. All six chambers are empty.

*(*Leslie *slowly opens her eyes and looks at the two men talking.* Joyce *takes the revolver in his hands and looks at it.)*

Joyce

(To Crosbie *as he comes across the room with the whiskey.)* Is this yours, Bob?

Crosbie

Yes. *(He goes up to* Leslie *and supports her while she sips.)*

Joyce

Have you questioned the boys?

Withers

Yes, they know nothing. They were asleep in their own quarters. They were awakened by the firing, and when they came here they found Hammond lying on the floor.

Joyce

Where exactly?

Withers

(Pointing.) There. On the verandah under the lamp.

Leslie

Thank you. I shall feel better in a minute. I'm sorry to be so tiresome.

Joyce

Do you feel well enough to talk now?

Leslie

I think so.

Crosbie

You needn't be in such a devil of a hurry. She's in no condition to make a long statement now.

Joyce

It'll have to be made sooner or later.

Leslie

It's all right, Robert, really. I feel perfectly well now.

Joyce

I think we ought to be put in possession of the facts as soon as possible.

Withers

Take your time, Mrs. Crosbie. After all, we're all friends here.

Leslie

What do you want me to do? If you've got any questions to ask, I'll do my best to answer them.

Joyce

Perhaps it would be better if you told us the whole story in your own way. Do you think you can manage that?

Leslie

I'll try. *(She gets up from the long chair.)*

Crosbie

What do you want to do?

Leslie

I want to sit upright. *(She sits down and for a moment hesitates.)*

*(*Crosbie *and* Withers *are standing up.* Joyce *is seated opposite to her.)*

(The eyes of all of them are on her face.)

(Addressing Withers.*)* Robert was spending the night in Singapore, you know.

Withers

Yes, your boy told me that.

Leslie

I was going in with him, but I wasn't feeling very well and I thought I'd stay here. I never mind being alone. *(With a half smile at* Crosbie.*)* A planter's wife gets used to that, you know.

Crosbie

That's true.

Leslie

I had dinner rather late, and then I started working on my lace. *(She points to the pillow on which a piece of lace half made is pinned with little pins.)*

Crosbie

My wife is rather a dab at lace-making.

Withers

Yes, I know. I've heard that.

Leslie

I don't know how long I'd been working. It fascinates me, you know, and I lose all sense of time. Suddenly I heard a footstep outside and some one came up the steps of the verandah and said: "Good evening. Can I come in?" I was startled, because I hadn't heard a car drive up.

Withers

Hammond left his car about a quarter of a mile down the road. It's parked under the trees. Your chauffeur noticed it as we were driving back.

Joyce

I wonder why Hammond left his car there.

Withers

Presumably he did not want any one to hear him drive up.

Joyce

Go on, Mrs. Crosbie.

Leslie

At first I couldn't see who it was. I work in spectacles, you know, and in the half-darkness of the verandah it was impossible for me to recognise anybody. "Who is it?" I said. "Geoff Hammond." "Oh, of course, come in and have a drink," I said. And I took off my spectacles. I got up and shook hands with him.

Joyce

Were you surprised to see him?

Leslie

I was rather. He hadn't been up to the house for ages, had he, Robert?

Crosbie

Three months at least, I should think.

Leslie

I told him Robert was away. He'd had to go to Singapore on business.

Withers

What did he say to that?

Leslie

He said: "Oh, I'm sorry. I felt rather lonely to-night, so I thought I'd just come along and see how you were getting on." I asked him how he'd come, as I hadn't heard a car, and he said he'd left it on the road because he thought we might be in bed and asleep and he didn't want to wake us up.

Joyce

I see.

Leslie

As Robert was away there wasn't any whiskey in the room, but I thought the boys would be asleep, so I didn't call them; I just went

and fetched it myself. Hammond mixed himself a drink and lit his pipe.

Joyce

Was he quite sober?

Leslie

I never thought about it. I suppose he had been drinking, but just then it didn't occur to me.

Joyce

What happened?

Leslie

Well, nothing very much; I put on my spectacles again and went on with my work. We chatted about one thing and another. He asked me if Robert had heard that a tiger had been seen on the road two or three days ago. It had killed a couple of goats and the villagers were in a state about it. He said he thought he'd try to get it over the week-end.

Crosbie

Oh, yes, I know about that. Don't you remember I spoke to you about it at tiffin yesterday.

Leslie

Did you? I believe you did.

Withers

Fire away, Mrs. Crosbie.

Leslie

Well, we were just chatting. Then suddenly he said something rather silly.

Joyce

What?

Leslie

It's hardly worth repeating. He paid me a little compliment.

Joyce

I think perhaps you'd better tell us exactly what he said.

Leslie

He said: "I don't know how you can bear to disfigure yourself with those horrible spectacles. You've got very pretty eyes indeed, you know, and it's too bad of you to hide them."

Joyce

Had he ever said anything of the sort to you before?

Leslie

No, never. I was a little taken aback, but I thought it best to take it quite lightly. "I make no pretensions to being a raving beauty, you know," I said. "But you are," he said. It sounds awfully silly to repeat things like this.

Joyce

Never mind. Please let us have his exact words.

Leslie

Well, he said: "It's too bad of you to try to make yourself look plain, but, thank God, you don't succeed." *(She gives the two strangers a jointly deprecating look.)* I shrugged my shoulders. I thought it rather impertinent of him to talk to me like that.

Crosbie

I don't wonder.

Joyce

Did you say anything?

Leslie

Yes, I said: "If you ask me point blank I'm bound to tell you that I don't care a row of pins what you think about me." I was trying to snub him, but he only laughed. "I'm going to tell you all the same," he said. "I think you're the prettiest thing I've seen for many a long year." "Sweet of you," I said, "but in that case I can only think you half-witted." He laughed again. He'd been sitting over there, and he got up and drew up a chair near the table I was working at. "You're not going to have the face to deny that you have the prettiest hands in the world," he said. That rather put my back up. In point of fact, my hands are not very good, and I'd just as soon people didn't talk about them. It's only an awful fool of a woman who wants to be flattered on her worst points.

Crosbie

Leslie darling. *(He takes one of her hands and kisses it.)*

Leslie

Oh, Robert, you silly old thing.

Joyce

Well, when Hammond was talking in that strain, did he just sit still with his arms crossed?

Leslie

Oh, no. He tried to take .one of my hands. But I gave him a little tap. I wasn't particularly annoyed, I merely thought he was rather silly. I said to him: "Don't be an idiot. Sit down where you were before and talk sensibly, or else I shall send you home."

Withers

But, Mrs. Crosbie, I wonder you didn't kick him out there and then.

Leslie

I didn't want to make a fuss. You know, there are men who think it's their duty to flirt with a woman when they get the chance. I believe they think women expect it of them, and for all I know a good many do. But I'm not one of them, am I, Robert?

Crosbie

Far from it.

Leslie

A woman only makes a perfect fool of herself if she makes a scene every time a man pays her one or two compliments. She doesn't need much experience of the world to discover that it means rather less than nothing. I didn't suspect for an instant that Hammond was serious.

Joyce

When did you suspect?

Leslie

Then. What he said next. You see, he didn't move. He just looked at me straight in the face, and said: "Don't you know that I'm awfully in love with you?"

Crosbie

The cad.

Leslie

"I don't," I answered. You see, it meant so little to me that I hadn't the smallest difficulty in keeping perfectly cool. "I don't believe it for a minute," I said, "and even if it were true I don't want you to say it."

Joyce

Were you surprised?

Leslie

Of course I was surprised. Why, we've known him for seven years, Robert.

Crosbie

Yes, he came here after the war.

Leslie

And he's never paid me the smallest attention. I didn't suppose he even knew what colour my eyes were. If you'd asked me, I should have said I didn't begin to exist for him.

Crosbie

(To Joyce.*)* You must remember that we never saw very much of him.

Leslie

When he first came here he was ill and I got Robert to go over and fetch him; he was all alone in his bungalow.

Joyce

Where was his bungalow?

Crosbie

About six or seven miles from here.

Leslie

I couldn't bear the idea of his lying there without any one to look after him, so we brought him here and took care of him till he was fit again. We saw a certain amount of him after that, but we had nothing much in common, and we never became very intimate.

Crosbie

For the last two or three years we've hardly seen him at all. To tell you the truth, after all that Leslie had done for him when he was ill I thought he was almost too casual.

Leslie

He used to come over now and then to play tennis, and we used to meet him at other people's houses now and again. But I don't think I'd set eyes on him for a month.

Joyce

I see.

Leslie

He helped himself to another whiskey and soda. I began to wonder if he'd been drinking. Anyhow, I thought he'd had enough. "I wouldn't drink any more if I were you," I said. I was quite friendly about it. I wasn't the least frightened or anything like that. It never occurred to me that I couldn't manage him. He didn't pay any attention to what I said. He emptied his glass and put it down. "Do you think I'm talking to you like this because I'm drunk?" he asked in a funny abrupt way. "That's the most obvious explanation, isn't it?" I said. It's awful having to tell you all this. I'm so ashamed. It's so disgraceful.

Joyce

I know it's hard. But for your own sake I beg you to tell us the whole story now.

Withers

If Mrs. Crosbie would like to wait a little, I don't see any great harm in that.

Leslie

No, if I've got to tell it I'll tell it now. What's the good of waiting? My head's simply throbbing.

Crosbie

Don't be too hard on her, Howard.

Leslie

He's being as kind as he can be.

Joyce

I hope so. "That's the most obvious explanation," you said.

Leslie

"Well, it's a lie," he said. "I've loved you ever since I first knew you. I've held my tongue as long as I could, and now it's got to come out. I love you. I love you. I love you." He repeated it just like that.

Crosbie

(Between his teeth.) The swine.

Leslie

(Rising from her seat and standing.) I got up and I put away the pillow with my lace. I held out my hand. "Good-night," I said. He didn't take it. He just stood and looked at me and his eyes were all funny. "I'm not going now," he said. Then I began to lose my temper. I think I'd kept it too long. I think I'm a very even-tempered woman, but when I'm roused I don't care very much what I say. "But, you poor fool," I cried at him, "don't you know that I've never loved any one but Robert, and even if I didn't love Robert you're the last man I should care for." "What do I care?" he said. "Robert's away."

Crosbie

The cur! The filthy cur! Oh, by God . . . .

Joyce

Be quiet, Bob.

Leslie

That was the last straw. I was beside myself. Even then I wasn't frightened. It never occurred to me he'd dare—he'd dare . . . . I was just angry. I thought he was just a filthy swine to talk to me like that because he knew Robert was safely out of the way. "If you don't go away this minute," I said, "I shall call the boys and have you thrown out." He gave a filthy look. "They're out of earshot," he said. I walked past him quickly. I wanted to get out on to the verandah, so that I could give the boys a call. I knew they'd hear me from there. But he took hold of my arm and swung me back. "Let me go," I screamed. I was furious. "Not much," he said. "Not much. I've got you now." I opened my mouth and I shouted as loud as I could: "Boy! boy!" But he put his hand over it. . . . Oh, it's horrible. I can't go on. It's asking too much of me. It's so shameful, shameful.

Crosbie

Oh, Leslie, my darling. I wish to God I'd never left you.

Leslie

Oh, it was awful, *(She sobs broken-heartedly.)*

Joyce

I beseech you to control yourself. You've been wonderful up till now. I know it's very hard, but you must tell us everything.

Leslie

I didn't know what he was doing. He flung his arms round me. He began to kiss me. I struggled. His lips were burning, and I turned my mouth away. "No, no, no!" I screamed. "Leave me alone. I won't!" I began to cry. I tried to tear myself away from him. He seemed like a madman.

Crosbie

I can't bear much more of this.

Joyce

Be quiet, Bob.

Leslie

I don't know what happened. I was all confused. I was so frightened. He seemed to be talking, talking. He kept on saying that he loved me and wanted me. Oh, the misery! He held me so tight that I couldn't move. I never knew how strong he was. I felt as weak as a rat. It was awful to feel so helpless. I'm trying to tell you everything, but it's all in a blur. I felt myself growing weaker and weaker, and I thought I'd faint. His breath was hot on my face, and it made me feel desperately sick.

Withers

The brute.

Leslie

He kissed me. He kissed my neck. Oh, the horror! And he held me so tight that I felt I couldn't breathe. Then he lifted me right off my feet. I tried to kick him. He only held me tighter. Then I felt he was carrying me. He didn't say anything. I didn't look at him, but somehow I saw his face and it was as white as a sheet and his eyes were burning. He wasn't a man any more, he was a savage; I felt my heart pounding against my ribs. . . . Don't look at me. I don't want any of you to look at me. It flashed across me that he was carrying me to the bedroom. Oh!

Crosbie

If he weren't dead I'd strangle him with my own hands.

Leslie

It all happened in a moment He stumbled and fell. I don't know why. I don't know if he caught his foot in something or if it was just an accident. I fell with him. It gave me a chance. Somehow his hold on me loosened and I snatched myself away from him. It was all instinctive; it was the affair of a moment; I didn't know what I was doing.

I jumped up and I ran round the sofa. He was a little slow at getting up.

Withers

He had a game leg.

Crosbie

Yes. He had his knee-cap smashed in the war.

Leslie

Then he made a dash at me. There was a revolver on the table and I snatched it. I didn't even know I'd fired. I heard a report. I saw him stagger. He cried out. He said something. I don't know what it was. I was beside myself. I was in a frenzy. He lurched out of the room on to the verandah and I followed him. I don't remember anything. I heard the reports one after the other. I don't ask you to believe me, but I didn't even know I was pulling the trigger. I saw Hammond fall down. Suddenly I heard a funny little click and it flashed through my mind that I'd fired all the cartridges and the revolver was empty. It was only then that I knew what I'd done. It was as if scales dropped from my eyes, and all at once I caught sight of Hammond, and he was lying there in a heap.

Crosbie

(Taking her in his arms.) My poor child.

Leslie

Oh, Robert, what have I done?

Crosbie

You've done what any woman would have done in your place, only nine-tenths of them wouldn't have had the nerve.

Joyce

How did the revolver happen to be there?

Crosbie

I don't very often leave Leslie alone for the night, but when I do I feel safer if she's got a weapon handy. I saw that all the barrels were loaded before I left, and thank God I did.

Leslie

That's all, Mr. Withers. You must forgive me if I wouldn't see you when you came. But I wanted my husband.

Withers

Of course. May I say that I think you behaved magnificently. I'm fearfully sorry we had to put you to the ordeal of telling us all this. But I think Mr. Joyce was right. It was much better that we should be in possession of all the facts immediately.

Leslie

Oh, I know.

Withers

It's quite obvious the man was drunk, and he only got what he deserved.

Leslie

And yet I'd give almost anything if I could bring him back to life. It's so awful to think that I killed him.

Crosbie

It was an easy death for him. By God, if ever I've wanted to torture any one . . . .

Leslie

No, don't, Robert, don't. The man's dead.

Joyce

Could I see the body for a minute?

Withers

Yes, I'll take you to where it is.

Leslie

(With a little shudder.) You don't want me to come?

Joyce

No, of course not. You stay here with Bob. We shall only be a minute.

*(*Joyce *and* Withers *go out.)*

Leslie

I'm so tired. I'm so desperately tired.

Crosbie

I know you are, darling. I'd do anything to help you, and there doesn't seem to be a thing I can do.

Leslie

You can love me.

Crosbie

I've always loved you with all my heart

Leslie

Yes, but now.

Crosbie

If I could love you any more I would now.

Leslie

You don't blame me?

Crosbie

Blame you? I think you've been splendid. By God, you're a plucky little woman.

Leslie

(Tenderly.) This is going to give you an awful lot of anxiety, my dear.

Crosbie

Don't think about me. I don't matter. Only think about yourself.

Leslie

What will they do to me?

Crosbie

Do? I'd like to see any one talk of doing anything to you. Why, there isn't a man or a woman in the colony who won't be proud to know you.

Leslie

I so hate the idea of every one talking about me.

Crosbie

I know, darling.

Leslie

Whatever people say you'll never believe anything against me, will you?

Crosbie

Of course not. What should they say?

Leslie

How can I tell? People are so unkind. They might easily say that he would never have made advances to me if I hadn't led him on.

Crosbie

I think that's the last thing any one who's ever seen you would dream of saying.

Leslie

Do you love me very much, Robert?

Crosbie

I can never tell you how much.

Leslie

We have been happy together all these years, haven't we?

Crosbie

By George, yes! We've been married for ten years and it hardly seems a day. Do you know that we've never even had a quarrel?

Leslie

(With a smile.) Who could quarrel with any one as kind and as good-natured as you are?

Crosbie

You know, Leslie, it makes me feel stupid and awkward to say some things. I'm not one of those fellows with the gift of the gab. But I do want you to know how awfully grateful I am to you for all you've done for me.

Leslie

Oh, my dear, what are you talking about?

Crosbie

You see, I'm not in the least clever. And I'm a great ugly hulking devil. I'm not fit to clean your boots really. I never knew at the beginning why you ever thought of me. You've been the best wife a man ever had.

Leslie

Oh, what nonsense!

Crosbie

Oh, no, it isn't. Because I don't say much you mustn't fancy I don't think a lot. I don't know how I've deserved all the luck I've had.

Leslie

Darling! It's so good to hear you say that.

(He takes her in his arms and lingeringly kisses her mouth. Joyce *and* Withers *return. Without self-consciousness* Leslie *releases herself from her husband's embrace and turns to the two men.)*

Wouldn't you like something to eat? You must be perfectly ravenous.

Withers

Oh, no, don't bother, Mrs. Crosbie.

Leslie

It's no bother at all. I expect the boys are about still, and if they're not I can easily make you a little something myself on the chafing-dish.

Joyce

Personally, I'm not at all hungry.

Leslie

Robert?

Crosbie

No, dear.

Joyce

In point of fact, I think it's about time we started for Singapore.

Leslie

(A trifle startled.) Now?

Joyce

It'll be dawn when we get there. By the time you've had a bath and some breakfast it'll be eight o'clock. We'll ring up the Attorney-General and find out when we can see him. Don't you think that's the best thing we can do, Withers?

Withers

Yes. I suppose so.

Joyce

You'll come with us, of course?

Withers

I think I'd better, don't you?

Leslie

Shall I be arrested?

Joyce

(With a glance at Withers.*)* I think you're by way of being under arrest now.

Withers

It's purely a matter of form, Mrs. Crosbie. Mr. Joyce's idea is that you should go to the Attorney-General and give yourself up. . . . Of course, all this is entirely out of my line. I don't exactly know what I ought to do.

Leslie

Poor Mr. Withers, I'm so sorry to give you all this trouble.

Withers

Oh, don't bother about me. The worst that can happen to me is that I shall get hauled over the coals for doing the wrong thing.

Leslie

(With a faint smile.) And you've lost a good night's rest, too.

Joyce

Well, we'll start when you're ready, my dear.

Leslie

Shall I be imprisoned?

Joyce

That is for the Attorney-General to decide. I hope that after you've told him your story we shall be able to get him to accept bail. It depends on what the charge is.

Crosbie

He's a very good fellow. I'm sure he'll do every thing he can.

Joyce

He must do his duty.

Crosbie

What do you mean by that?

Joyce

I think it not unlikely that he'll say only one charge is possible, and in that case I'm afraid that an application for bail would be useless.

Leslie

What charge?

Joyce

Murder.

(There is a moment's pause. The only sign that Leslie *gives that the word startles her is the clenching of one of her hands. But it requires quite an effort for her to keep her voice level and calm.)*

Leslie

I'll just go and change into a jumper. I won't be a minute. And I'll get a hat.

Joyce

Oh, very well. You'd better go and give her a hand, Bob. She'll want some one to do her up.

Leslie

Oh, no, don't bother. I can manage quite well by myself. A jumper doesn't have to be done up, my poor friend.

Joyce

Doesn't it? I forgot. I think you'd better go along all the same, old man.

Leslie

I'm not thinking of committing suicide, you know.

Joyce

I should hope not. The idea never occurred to me. I thought I'd like to have a word or two with Withers.

Leslie

Come along, Robert.

(They go into her bedroom, leaving the door open. Joyce *goes over and closes it.)*

Withers

By George! that woman's a marvel.

Joyce

(Good-humouredly.) In what way?

Withers

I never saw any one so calm in my life. Her self-control is absolutely amazing. She must have a nerve of iron.

Joyce

She has a great deal more character than I ever suspected.

Withers

You've known her a good many years, haven't you?

Joyce

Ever since she married Crosbie. He's my oldest pal in the colony. But I've never known her very well. She hardly ever came in to Singapore. I always found her very reserved, and I supposed she was shy. But my wife has been down here a good deal and she raves about her. She says that when you really get to know her she's a very nice woman.

Withers

Of course she s a very nice woman.

Joyce

(With the faintest irony.) She's certainly a very pretty one.

Withers

I was very much impressed by the way in which she told that terrible story.

Joyce

I wish she could have been a little more explicit here and there. It was rather confused towards the end.

Withers

My dear fellow, what do you expect? You could see that she was just holding on to herself like grim death. It seemed to me a marvel that she was so coherent. I say, what a swine that man was!

Joyce

By the way, did you know Hammond?

Withers

Yes, I knew him a little. I've only been here three months, you know.

Joyce

Is this your first job as A.D.O.?

Withers

Yes.

Joyce

Was Hammond a heavy drinker?

Withers

I don't know that he was. He could take his whack, but I never saw him actually drunk.

Joyce

Of course I've heard of him, but I never met him myself. He was by way of being rather a favourite with the ladies, wasn't he?

Withers

He was a very good-looking chap. You know the sort, very breezy and devil-may-care and generous with his money.

Joyce

Yes, that is the sort they fall for.

Withers

I've always understood he was one of the most popular men in the colony. Before he hurt his leg in the war he held the tennis championship, and I believe he had the reputation of being the best dancer between Penang and Singapore.

Joyce

Did you like him?

Withers

He was the sort of chap you couldn't help liking. I should have said he was a man who hadn't an enemy in the world.

Joyce

Was he the sort of chap you'd expect to do a thing like this?

Withers

How should I know? How can you tell what a man will do when he's drunk?

Joyce

My own opinion is that if a man's a blackguard when he's drunk he's a blackguard when he's sober.

Withers

What are you going to do, then?

Joyce

Well, it's quite evident that we must find out about him.

*(*Leslie *comes in, followed by her husband. She carries a hat in her hand.)*

Leslie

Well, I haven't been long, have I?

Joyce

I shall hold you up as an example to my Dorothy.

Leslie

She's probably not half as slow as you are. I can always dress in a quarter of the time that Robert can.

Crosbie

I'll just go and start her up.

Withers

Is there room for me, or shall I come along in the other car?

Leslie

Oh, there'll be plenty of room.
*(*Crosbie *and* Withers *go out.* Leslie *is about to follow.)*

Joyce

There's just one question I'd like to ask you.

Leslie

Yes, what is it?

Joyce

Just now, when I was looking at Hammond's body, it seemed to me that some of the shots must have been fired when he was actually lying on the ground. It gives me the impression that you must have stood over him and fired and fired.

Leslie

(Putting her hand wearily on her forehead.) I was trying to forget for a minute.

Joyce

Why did you do that?

Leslie

I didn't know I did.

Joyce

It's a question you must expect to be asked.

Leslie

I'm afraid you think I'm more cold-blooded than I am. I lost my head. After a certain time everything is all blurred and confused. I'm awfully sorry.

Joyce

Don't let it worry you, then. I daresay it's very natural. I'm sorry to make a nuisance of myself.

Leslie

Shall we go?

Joyce

Come on.

(They go out.)

(The Head-Boy *comes in and draws down the blinds that lead on to the verandah. He puts out the light and slips out. The room is in darkness.)*

THE END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Scene: *The scene is the visitors' room in the gaol at Singapore. A bare room with whitewashed walls, on one of which hangs a large map of the Malay Peninsula; on another is a framed photograph of* King George V. *The window is barred. The only furniture consists of a table in polished pitch pine and half a dozen chairs. There are doors right and left. Through the window you see the green, luxuriant leaves of some tropical plants and the blue sky.*

When the Curtain rises, Robert Crosbie *is seen standing at the window. He wears an air of profound dejection. He has on the clothes in which he is accustomed to walk over the estate, shorts and a khaki shirt; he holds his shabby old hat in his hand. He sighs deeply. The door on the left is opened and* Joyce *comes in. He is followed by* Ong Chi Seng *with a wallet.* Ong Chi Seng *is a Cantonese, small but trimly built; he is very neatly dressed in white ducks, patent leather shoes and gay silk socks. He wears a gold wrist watch and invisible pince-nez. From his breast pocket protrudes a rolled-gold fountain pen.)*

Crosbie

Howard.

Joyce

I heard you were here.

Crosbie

I'm waiting to see Leslie.

Joyce

I've come to see her too.

Crosbie

Do you want me to clear out?

Joyce

No, of course not. You go along and see her when they send for you, and then she can come here.

Crosbie

I wish they'd let me see her here. It's awful having to see her in a cell with that damned matron always there.

Joyce

I thought you'd probably look in at the office this morning.

Crosbie

I couldn't get away. After all, the work on the estate has got to go on, and if I'm not there to look after it everything goes to blazes. I came into Singapore the moment I could. Oh, how I hate that damned estate!

Joyce

In point of fact, I don't think it's been a bad thing for you during these last few weeks to have some work that you were obliged to do.

Crosbie

I daresay not. Sometimes I've thought I should go mad.

Joyce

You know you must pull yourself together, old man. You mustn't let yourself go to pieces.

Crosbie

Oh, I'm all right.

Joyce

You look as if you hadn't had a bath for a week.

Crosbie

Oh, I've had a bath all right. I know my kit's rather grubby, but it's all right for tramping over the estate. I came just as I was. I hadn't the heart to change.

Joyce

It's funny that you should have taken it all so much harder than your missus. She hasn't turned a hair.

Crosbie

She's worth ten of me. I know that. I don't mind confessing it, I'm all in. I'm like a lost sheep without Leslie. It's the first time we've been separated for more than a day since we were married. I'm so lonely without her. *(He catches sight of* Ong Chi Seng.*)* Who's that?

Joyce

Oh, that's my confidential clerk, Ong Chi Seng. *(* Ong Chi Seng *gives a little bow and smiles with a flash of white teeth.)*

Crosbie

What's he come here for?

Joyce

I brought him with me in case I wanted him. Ong Chi Seng is as good a lawyer as I am. He took his degree in the University of Hong Kong, and as soon as he's learnt the ins and outs of my business he's going to set up in opposition.

Ong Chi Seng

Hi, hi.

Joyce

Perhaps you'd better wait outside, Ong. I'll call you if I want you.

Ong Chi Seng

Very good, sir. I shall be within earshot

Joyce

It'll do if you're within call.
(Ong Chi Seng *goes out.)*

Crosbie

Oh, Howard, I wouldn't wish my worst enemy the agony that I've gone through during these horrible weeks.

Joyce

You look as if you hadn't had much sleep lately, old thing.

Crosbie

I haven't. I don't think I've closed my eyes the last three nights.

Joyce

Well, thank God it'll be over to-morrow. By the way, you'll clean yourself up a bit for the trial, won't you?

Crosbie

Oh, yes, rather. I'm staying with you to-night.

Joyce

Oh, are you? I'm glad. And you'll both come back to my house after the trial. Dorothy's determined to celebrate.

Crosbie

I think it's monstrous that they should have kept Leslie in this filthy prison.

Joyce

I think they had to do that.

Crosbie

Why couldn't they let her out on bail?

Joyce

It's a very serious charge, I'm afraid.

Crosbie

Oh, this red tape. She did what any decent woman would do in her place. Leslie's the best girl in the world. She wouldn't hurt a fly. Why, hang it all, man, I've been married to her for ten years; do you think I don't know her? God, if I'd got hold of that man I'd have wrung his neck, I'd have killed him without a moment's hesitation. So would you.

Joyce

My dear fellow, everybody's on your side.

Crosbie

Thank God nobody's got a good word to say for Hammond.

Joyce

I don't suppose a single member of the jury will go into the box without having already made up his mind to bring in a verdict of Not guilty.

Crosbie

Then the whole thing's a farce. She ought never to have been arrested in the first place; and then it's cruel, after all the poor girl's gone through, to subject her to the ordeal of a trial. There's not a soul I've met in Singapore, man or woman, who hasn't told me that Leslie was absolutely justified.

Joyce

The Law is the Law. She admits that she killed the man. It is terrible, and I'm dreadfully sorry both for you and for her.

Crosbie

I don't matter two straws.

Joyce

But the fact remains that murder has been committed, and in a civilised community a trial is inevitable.

Crosbie

Is it murder to exterminate noxious vermin? She shot him as she would have shot a mad dog.

Joyce

I should be wanting in my duty as your legal adviser if I didn't tell you that there is one point which causes me a little anxiety. If your wife had only shot Hammond once the whole thing would have been absolutely plain sailing. Unfortunately she fired six times.

Crosbie

Her explanation is perfectly simple. Under the circumstances any one would have done the same.

Joyce

I daresay, and, of course, I think the explanation is very reasonable.

Crosbie

Then what are you making a fuss about?

Joyce

It's no good closing our eyes to the facts. It's always a good plan to put yourself in another man's place, and I can't deny that if I were prosecuting for the Crown that is the point on which I would centre my enquiry.

Crosbie

Why?

Joyce

It suggests not so much panic as uncontrollable fury. Under the circumstances which your wife has described one would expect a woman to be frightened out of her wits, but hardly beside herself with rage.

Crosbie

Oh, isn't that rather far-fetched?

Joyce

I daresay. I just thought it was a point worth mentioning.

Crosbie

I should have thought the really important thing was Hammond's character, and, by Heaven! we've found out enough about him.

Joyce

We've found out that he was living with a Chinese woman, if that's what you mean.

Crosbie

Well, isn't that enough?

Joyce

I daresay it is. It was certainly an awful shock to his friends.

Crosbie

She'd been actually living in his bungalow for the last eight months.

Joyce

It's strange how angry that's made people. It's turned public opinion against him more than anything.

Crosbie

I can tell you this, if I'd known it I'd never have dreamed of letting him come to my place.

Joyce

I wonder how he managed to keep it so dark.

Crosbie

Will she be one of the witnesses?

Joyce

I shan't call her. I shall produce evidence that he was living with her, and, public feeling being what it is, I think the jury will accept that as proof that Hammond was a man of notorious character.

*(*A Sikh Sergeant of Police *comes into the room. He is tall, bearded, dark, and dressed in blue.)*

Sikh

(To Crosbie.*)* You come now, Sahib.

Crosbie

At last.

Joyce

You haven't got very long to wait now. In another twenty-four hours she'll be a free woman. Why don't you take her somewhere for a trip? Even though we're almost dead certain to get an acquittal, a trial of this sort is anxious work, and you'll both of you want a rest.

Crosbie

I think I shall want it more than Leslie. She's been a brick. Why, d'you know, when I've been to see her it wasn't I who cheered her up, it was she who cheered me up. By God! there's a plucky little woman for you, Howard.

Joyce

I agree. Her self-control is amazing.

Crosbie

I won't keep her long. I know you're busy.

Joyce

Thanks.

*(*Crosbie *goes out with the* Sikh Policeman.*)* Is my clerk outside, sergeant?

(He has hardly spoken the words before Ong Chi Seng *sidles in.)*

Give me those papers you've got there, will you?

Ong Chi Seng

Yes, sir.

(He takes a bundle of papers from his wallet and gives them to Joyce. Joyce *sits down with them at the table.)*

Joyce

That's all, Ong. If I want you I'll call.

Ong Chi Seng

May I trouble you for a few words private conversation, sir?

*(*Ong Chi Seng *expresses himself with elaborate accuracy; he has learnt English as a foreign language, and speaks it perfectly; but he has trouble with his R's, he always turns them into L's, and this gives his careful speech every now and then a faintly absurd air.)*

Joyce

(With a slight smile.) It's no trouble, Ong.

Ong Chi Seng

The matter upon which I desire to speak, to you, sir, is delicate and confidential.

Joyce

Mrs. Crosbie will be here in five minutes. Don't you think we might find a more suitable occasion for a heart-to-heart talk?

Ong Chi Seng

The matter on which I desired to speak with you, sir, has to do with the case of *R. v. Crosbie*.

Joyce

Oh?

Ong Chi Seng

Yes, sir.

Joyce

I have a great regard for your intelligence, Ong, I am sure I can trust you not to tell me anything that, as Mrs. Crosbie's counsel, it is improper that I should be advised of.

Ong Chi Seng

I think, sir, that you may rest assured of my discretion. I am a graduate of the University of Hong Kong, and I won the Chancellor's Prize for English composition.

Joyce

Fire away, then.

Ong Chi Seng

A circumstance has come to my knowledge, sir, which seems to me to put a different complexion on this case.

Joyce

What circumstance?

Ong Chi Seng

It has come to my knowledge, sir, that there is a letter in existence from the defendant to the unfortunate victim of the tragedy.

Joyce

I should not be at all surprised. In the course of the last seven years I have no doubt that Mrs. Crosbie often had occasion to write to Mr. Hammond.

Ong Chi Seng

That is very probable, sir. Mrs. Crosbie must have communicated with the deceased frequently, to invite him to dine with her, for example, or to propose a tennis game. That was my first idea when the matter was brought to my notice. This letter, however, was written on the day of the late Mr. Hammond's death.

(There is an instant's pause. Joyce, *a faint smile of amusement in his eyes, continues to look intently at* Ong Chi Seng.*)*

Joyce

Who told you this?

Ong Chi Seng

The circumstances were brought to my notice, sir, by a friend of mine.

Joyce

I have always known that your discretion was beyond praise, Ong Chi Seng.

Ong Chi Seng

You will no doubt recall, sir, that Mrs. Crosbie has stated that until the fatal night she had had no communication with the deceased for several weeks.

Joyce

Yes, I do.

Ong Chi Seng

This letter indicates in my opinion that her statement was not in every respect accurate.

Joyce

(Stretching out his hand as though to take it.) Have you got the letter?

Ong Chi Seng

No, sir.

Joyce

Oh! I suppose you know its contents.

Ong Chi Seng

My friend very kindly gave me a copy. Would you like to peruse it, sir?

Joyce

I should.

*(*Ong Chi Seng *takes from an inside pocket a bulky wallet. It is filled with papers, Singapore dollars and cigarette cards.)*

Joyce

Ah, I see you collect cigarette cards.

Ong Chi Seng

Yes, sir. I am happy to say that I have a collection which is almost unique and very comprehensive.

(From the confusion he extracts a half-sheet of notepaper and places it before Joyce*.)*

Joyce

(Reading slowly, as though he could hardly believe his eyes.) "Robert will be away for the night. I absolutely must see you. I shall expect you at eleven. I am desperate, and if you don't come I won't answer for the consequences. . . . Don't drive up. Leslie. . . . What the devil does it mean?

Ong Chi Seng

That is for you to say, sir.

Joyce

What makes you think that this letter was written by Mrs. Crosbie?

Ong Chi Seng

I have every confidence in the veracity of my informant, sir.

Joyce

That's more than I have.

Ong Chi Seng

The matter can very easily be put to the proof. Mrs. Crosbie will no doubt be able to tell you at once whether she wrote such a letter or not.

*(*Joyce *gets up and walks once or twice up and down the room. Then he stops and faces* Ong Chi Seng.*)*

Joyce

It is inconceivable that Mrs. Crosbie should have written such a letter.

Ong Chi Seng

If that is your opinion, sir, the matter is, of course, ended. My friend spoke to me on the subject only because he thought, as I was in your office, you might like to know of the existence of this letter before a communication was made to the Public Prosecutor.

Joyce

Who has the original?

Ong Chi Seng

You will remember, sir, no doubt, that after the death of Mr. Hammond it was discovered that he had had relations with a Chinese woman. The letter is at present in her possession.

(They face each other for a moment silently.)

Joyce

I am obliged to you, Ong. I will give the matter my consideration.

Ong Chi Seng

Very good, sir. Do you wish me to make a communication to that effect to my friend?

Joyce

I daresay it would be as well if you kept in touch with him.

Ong Chi Seng

Yes, sir.

(He leaves the room. Joyce *reads through the letter once more with knitted brows; he hears a sound and realises that* Leslie *is coming. He places the copy of the letter among the papers on the table.* Leslie *comes in with the* Matron. *This is a stout middle-aged English-woman in a white dress.* Leslie *is very simply and neatly dressed; her hair is done with her habitual care; she is cool and self-possessed.)*

Joyce

Good morning, Mrs. Crosbie.

(Leslie *comes forward graciously. She holds out her hand as calmly as though she were receiving him in her drawing-room.)*

Leslie

How do you do? I wasn't expecting you so early.

Joyce

How are you to-day?

Leslie

I'm in the best of health, thank you. This is a wonderful place for a rest cure. And Mrs. Parker looks after me like a mother.

Joyce

How do you do, Mrs. Parker?

Mrs. Parker

Very well, thank you, sir. This I can't help saying, Mrs. Crosbie, no one could be less trouble than what you are. I shall be sorry to lose you, and that's a fact.

Leslie

(With a gracious smile.) You've been very kind to me, Mrs. Parker.

Mrs. Parker

Well, I've been company for you. When you're not used to it, it's lonely like in a place like this. It's a shame they ever put you here, if you want to know what I think about it.

Joyce

Well, Mrs. Parker, I daresay you won't mind leaving us. Mrs. Crosbie and I have got business to talk about.

Mrs. Parker.

Very good, sir.
(She goes out.)

Leslie

Sometimes she drives me nearly mad, she's so chatty, poor dear. Isn't it strange how few people there are who can ever realise that you may be perfectly satisfied with your own company?

Joyce

You must have had plenty of that lately.

Leslie

I've read a great deal, you know, and I've worked at my lace.

Joyce

I need hardly ask if you've slept well.

Leslie

I've slept like a top. The time has really passed very quickly.

Joyce

It's evidently agreed with you. You're looking very much better and stronger than a few weeks ago.

Leslie

That's more than poor Robert is. He's a wreck, poor darling. I'm thankful for his sake that it'll all be over to-morrow. I think he's just about at the end of his tether.

Joyce

He's very much more anxious about you than you appear to be about yourself.

Leslie

Won't you sit down?

Joyce

Thank you.

(They seat themselves. Joyce *at the table, with his papers in front of him.)*

Leslie

I'm not exactly looking forward to the trial, you know.

Joyce

One of the things that has impressed me is that each time you've told your story you've told it in exactly the same words. You've never varied a hair's breadth.

Leslie

(Gently chaffing him.) What does that suggest to your legal mind?

Joyce

Well, it suggests either that you have an extraordinary memory or that you're telling the plain, unvarnished truth.

Leslie

I'm afraid I have a very poor memory.

Joyce

I suppose I'm right in thinking that you had no communication with Hammond for several weeks before the catastrophe.

Leslie

(With a friendly little smile.) Oh, quite. I'm positive of that. The last time we met was at a tennis party at the McFarrens'. I don't think I said more than two words to him. They have two courts, you know, and we didn't happen to be in the same sets.

Joyce

And you hadn't written to him?

Leslie

Oh, no.

Joyce

Are you perfectly certain of that?

Leslie

Oh, perfectly. There was nothing I should write to him for except to ask him to dine or play tennis, and I hadn't done either for months.

Joyce

At one time you'd been on fairly intimate terms with him. How did it happen that you had stopped asking him to anything?

Leslie

(With a little shrug of the shoulders.) One gets tired of people. We hadn't anything very much in common. Of course, when he was ill Robert and I did everything we could for him, but the last year or two he's been quite well. And he was very popular. He had a good many calls on his time and there didn't seem to be any need to shower invitations upon him.

Joyce

Are you quite certain that was all?

*(*Leslie *hesitates for a moment and reflectively looks down.)*

Leslie

Well, of course, I knew about the Chinese woman. I'd actually seen her.

Joyce

Oh! You never mentioned that.

Leslie

It wasn't a very pleasant thing to talk about. And I knew you'd find out for yourselves soon enough. Under the circumstances I didn't think it would be very nice of me to be the first to tell you about his private life.

Joyce

What was she like?

*(*Leslie *gives a slight start and a hard look suddenly crosses her face.)*

Leslie

Oh, horrible. Stout and painted and powdered. Covered with gold chains and bangles and pins. Not even young. She's older than I am.

Joyce

And it was after you knew about her that you ceased having anything to do with Hammond?

Leslie

Yes.

Joyce

But you said nothing about it to your husband.

Leslie

It wasn't the sort of thing I cared to talk to Robert about.

*(*Joyce *watches her for a moment. Any suggestion of emotion that showed itself on her face when she spoke of the Chinese woman has left it and she is now once more cool and self-possessed.)*

Joyce

I think I should tell you that there is in existence a letter in your handwriting from you to Geoff Hammond.

Leslie

In the past I've often sent him little notes to ask him to something or other or to get me something when I knew he was going into Singapore.

Joyce

This letter asks him to come and see you because Robert was going to Singapore.

Leslie

(Smiling.) That's impossible. I never did anything of the kind.

Joyce

You'd better read it for yourself.

(He takes it from among the papers in front of him and hands it to her. She gives it a moment's glance and hands it back.)

Leslie

That's not my handwriting.

Joyce

I know. It's said to be an exact copy of the original.

(She takes the letter again and now reads the words. And as she reads a horrible change comes over her. Her colourless face grows dreadful to look at. The flesh seems on a sudden to fall away and her skin is tightly stretched over the bones. She stares at Joyce *with eyes that start from their sockets.)*

Leslie

(In a whisper.) What does it mean?

Joyce

That is for you to say.

Leslie

I didn't write it. I swear I didn't write it.

Joyce

Be very careful what you say. If the original is in your handwriting, it would be useless to deny it.

Leslie

It would be forgery.

Joyce

It would be difficult to prove that. It would be easy to prove that it was genuine.

(A shiver passes through her body. She takes out a handkerchief and wipes the palms of her hands. She looks at the letter again.)

Leslie

It's not dated. If I had written it and forgotten all about it, it might have been written years ago. If you'll give me time I'll try to remember the circumstances.

Joyce

I noticed there was no date. If this letter were in the hands of the prosecution they would cross-examine your house-boys. They would soon find out whether some one took a letter to Hammond on the day of his death.

(She clasps her hands violently and sways on her chair so that you might think she would faint.)

Leslie

I swear to you that I did not write that letter.

Joyce

In that case we need not go into the matter further. If the person who possesses this letter sees fit to place it in the hands of the prosecution you will be prepared.

(There is a long pause. Joyce *waits for* Leslie *to speak, but she stares straight in front of her.)*

If you have nothing more to say to me, I think I'll be getting back to my office.

Leslie

(Still not looking at him.) What would any one who read the letter be inclined to think that it meant?

Joyce

He'd know that you had told a deliberate lie.

Leslie

When?

Joyce

When you stated definitely that you had had no communication with Hammond for at least six weeks.

Leslie

The whole thing has been a terrible shock to me. The events of that horrible night have been a nightmare. It's not very strange if one detail has escaped my memory.

Joyce

Your memory has reproduced very exactly every particular of your interview with Hammond. It is very strange that you should have forgotten so important a point as that he came to the bungalow on the night of his death at your express desire.

Leslie

I hadn't forgotten.

Joyce

Then why didn't you mention it?

Leslie

I was afraid to. I thought you'd none of you believe my story if I admitted that he'd come at my invitation. I daresay it was very stupid of me. I lost my head, and after I'd once said that I'd had no communication with Hammond I was obliged to stick to it

Joyce

You will be required to explain then why you asked Hammond to come to you when Robert was away for the night.

Leslie

(With a break in her voice.) It was a surprise I was preparing for Robert's birthday. I knew he wanted a new gun, and, you know, I'm dreadfully stupid about sporting things. I wanted to talk to Geoff about it. I thought I'd get him to order it for me.

Joyce

Perhaps the terms of the letter are not very clear to your recollection. Will you have another look at it.

Leslie

(Quickly drawing back.) No, I don't want to.

Joyce

Then I must read it to you. *Robert will be away for the night. I absolutely must see you. I shall expect you at eleven. I am desperate, and if you don't come I won't answer for the consequences. Don't drive up.—Leslie.* Does it seem to you the sort of letter a woman would write to a rather distant acquaintance because she wanted to consult him about buying a gun?

Leslie

I daresay it's rather extravagant and emotional. I do express myself like that, you know. I'm quite prepared to admit it's rather silly.

Joyce

I must have been very much mistaken. I always thought you a very reserved and self-possessed woman.

Leslie

And after all, Geoff Hammond wasn't quite a distant acquaintance. When he was ill I nursed him like a mother.

Joyce

By the way, did you call him Geoff?

Leslie

Everybody did. He wasn't the kind of man any one would think of calling Mr. Hammond.

Joyce

Why did you ask him to come at so late an hour?

Leslie

(Recovering her self-possession.) Is eleven very late? He was always dining somewhere or other. I thought he'd look in on his way home.

Joyce

And why did you ask him not to drive up?

Leslie

(With a shrug of the shoulder.) You know how Chinese boys gossip. If they'd heard him come, the last thing they'd have ever thought was that he was there for a perfectly innocent purpose.

*(*Joyce *gets up and walks once or twice up and down the room. Then, leaning over the back of his chair, he speaks in a tone of deep gravity.)*

Joyce

Mrs. Crosbie, I want to talk to you very, very seriously. This case was comparatively plain sailing. There was only one point that seemed to me to require explanation. So far as I could judge, you had fired no less than four shots into Hammond when he was lying on the ground. It was hard to accept the possibility that a delicate, frightened woman, of gentle nurture and refined instincts, should have surrendered to an absolutely uncontrollable frenzy. But, of course, it was admissible. Although Geoffrey Hammond was much liked, and on the whole thought highly of, I was prepared to prove that he was the sort of man who might be guilty of the crime which in justification of your act you accused him of. The fact, which was discovered after his death, that he had been living with a Chinese woman gave us something very definite to go upon. That robbed him of any sympathy that might have been felt for him. We made up our minds to make every use of the odium that such a connection cast upon him in the minds of all respectable people. I told your husband just now that I was

certain of an acquittal, and I wasn't just telling him that to cheer him up. I do not believe the jury would have left the box.

(They look into each other's eyes. Leslie *is strangely still. She is like a bird paralysed by the fascination of a snake.)*

But this letter has thrown an entirely different complexion on the case. I am your legal adviser. I shall represent you in court. I take your story as you tell it to me, and I shall conduct your defence according to its terms. It may be that I believe your statements, or it may be that I doubt them. The duty of counsel is to persuade the jury that the evidence placed before them is not such as to justify them in bringing in a verdict of guilty, and any private opinion he may have of the innocence or guilt of his client is entirely beside the point.

Leslie

I don't know what you're driving at.

Joyce

You're not going to deny that Hammond came to your house at your urgent and, I may even say, hysterical invitation?

(Leslie does not answer for a moment. She seems to consider.)

Leslie

They can prove that the letter was taken to his bungalow by one of the house-boys. He rode over on his bicycle.

Joyce

You mustn't expect other people to be stupider than you. The letter will put them on the track of suspicions that have entered nobody's head. I will not tell you what I personally thought when I read it. I do not wish you to tell me anything but what is needed to save your neck.

*(*Leslie *crumples up suddenly. She falls to the floor in a dead faint before* Joyce *can catch her. He looks round the room for water, but can find none. He glances at the door, but will not call for help. He does not wish to be disturbed. He kneels down beside her, waiting for her to recover, and at last she opens her eyes.)*

Joyce

Keep quite still. You'll be better in a minute.

Leslie

Don't let any one come.

Joyce

No. No.

Leslie

Mr. Joyce, you won't let them hang me.
(She begins to cry hysterically: he tries in undertones to calm her.)

Joyce

Sh! Sh! Don't make a noise. Sh! Sh! It's all right. Don't, don't, don't! For goodness' sake pull yourself together.

Leslie

Give me a minute.
(You see the effort she makes to regain her self-control and soon she is once more calm.)

Joyce

(With almost unwilling admiration.) You've got pluck. I think no one could deny that.

Leslie

Let me get up now. It was silly of me to faint.
(He gives her his hand and helps her to her feet. He leads her to a chair and she sinks down wearily.)

Joyce

Do you feel a little better?

Leslie

(With her eyes closed.) Don't talk to me for a moment or two.

Joyce

Very well.

Leslie

(At last, with a little sigh.) I'm afraid I've made rather a mess of things.

Joyce

I'm sorry.

Leslie

For Robert, not for me. You distrusted me from the beginning.

Joyce

That's neither here nor there.
(She gives him a glance and then looks down.)

Leslie

Isn't it possible to get hold of the letter?

Joyce

(With a frown to conceal his embarrassment.') I don't think anything would have been said to me about it if the person in whose possession it is was not prepared to sell it.

Leslie

Who's got it?

Joyce

The Chinese woman who was living in Hammond's house.

(Leslie *instinctively clenches her hands; but again controls herself.)*

Leslie

Does she want an awful lot for it?

Joyce

I imagine that she has a pretty shrewd idea of its value. I doubt if it would be possible to get hold of it except for a very large sum.

Leslie

(Hoarsely.) Are you going to let me be hanged.

Joyce

(With some irritation.) Do you think it's so simple as all that to secure possession of an unwelcome piece of evidence?

Leslie

You say the woman is prepared to sell it.

Joyce

But I don't know that I'm prepared to buy it.

Leslie

Why not?

Joyce

I don't think you know what you're asking me. Heaven knows, I don't wish to make phrases, but I've always thought I was by way of being an honest man. You're asking me to do something that is no different from suborning a witness.

Leslie

(Her voice rising.) Do you mean to say you can save me and you won't! What harm have I ever done you? You can't be so cruel.

Joyce

I'm sorry it sounds cruel. I want to do my best for you, Mrs. Crosbie. A lawyer has a duty not only to his client, but also to his profession.

Leslie

(With dismay.) Then what is going to happen to me?

Joyce

(Very gravely.) Justice must take its course.

*(*Leslie *grows very pale. A little shudder passes through her body. When she answers her voice is low and quiet.)*

Leslie

I put myself in your hands. Of course, I have no right to ask you to do anything that isn't proper. I was asking more for Robert's sake than for mine. But if you knew everything, I believe you'd think I was deserving of your pity.

Joyce

Poor old Bob, it'll nearly kill him. He's utterly unprepared.

Leslie

If I'm hanged it certainly won't bring Geoff Hammond back to life again.

(There is a moment's silence while Joyce *reflects upon the situation.)*

Joyce

(Almost to himself.) Sometimes I think that when we say our honour prevents us from doing this or that we deceive ourselves, and our real motive is vanity. I ask myself, what really is the explanation of that letter? I daren't ask you. It's not fair to you to conclude from it that you killed Hammond without provocation. *(With emotion.)* It's absurd how fond I am of Bob. You see, I've known him so long. His life may very well be ruined, too.

Leslie

I know I have no right to ask you to do anything for me, but Robert is so kind and simple and good. I think he's never done any one any harm in his life. Can't you save him from this bitter pain and this disgrace?

Joyce

You mean everything in the world to him, don't you?

Leslie

I suppose so. I'm very grateful for the love he's given me.

Joyce

(Making his resolution.) I'm going to do what I can for you. *(She gives a little gasp of relief.)* But don't think I don't know I'm doing wrong. I am. I'm doing it with my eyes open.

Leslie

It can't be wrong to save a suffering woman. You're doing no harm to anybody else.

Joyce

You don't understand. It's only natural. Let's not discuss that. . . . Do you know anything about Bob's circumstances?

Leslie

He has a good many tin shares and a part interest in two or three rubber estates. I suppose he could raise money.

Joyce

He would have to be told what it was for.

Leslie

Will it be necessary to show him the letter?

Joyce

Don't you want him to see it?

Leslie

No.

Joyce

I shall do everything possible to prevent him from seeing it till after the trial. He will be an important witness. I think it very necessary that he should be as firmly convinced of your innocence as he is now.

Leslie

And afterwards?

Joyce

I'll still do my best for you.

Leslie

Not for my sake—for his. If he loses his trust in me he loses everything.

Joyce

It's strange that a man can live with a woman for ten years and not know the first thing about her. It's rather frightening.

Leslie

He knows that he loves me. Nothing else matters.

Joyce

(Goes to the door and opens it.) Mrs. Parker, I'm just going.
*(*Mrs. Parker *comes in again.)*

Mrs. Parker

Gracious, how white you look, Mrs. Crosbie. Mr. Joyce hasn't been upsetting you, has he? You look like a ghost.

Leslie

(Graciously smiling, with an instinctive resumption of her social manner.) No, he's been kindness itself. I daresay the strain is beginning to tell on me a little. *(She holds out her hand to* Joyce*.)* Goodbye. It's good of you to take all this trouble for me. I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am.

Joyce

I shan't see you again till just before the trial tomorrow.

Leslie

I've got a lot to do before then. I've been making Mrs. Parker a lace collar, and I want to get it done before I leave here.

Mrs. Parker

It's so grand, I shall never be able to bring myself to wear it. She makes beautiful lace, you'd be surprised.

Joyce

I know she does.

Leslie

I'm afraid it's my only accomplishment.

Joyce

Good morning, Mrs. Parker.

Mrs. Parker

Good morning, sir.
(She goes out accompanied by Leslie*.)*
(Joyce gathers his papers together. There is a knock at the door.)

Joyce

Come in.

(The door is opened and Ong Chi Seng *enters.)*

Ong Chi Seng

I desire to remind you, sir, that you have an appointment with Mr. Reed, of Reed and Pollock, at twelve-thirty.

Joyce

(With a glance at his watch.) He'll have to wait.

Ong Chi Seng

Very good, sir. *(He goes to the door and is about to go out, then, as though on an afterthought, he stops.)* Is there anything further you wish me to say to my friend, sir?

Joyce

What friend?

Ong Chi Seng

About the letter which Mrs. Crosbie wrote to Hammond, deceased, sir.

Joyce

(Very casually.) Oh, I'd forgotten about that I mentioned it to Mrs. Crosbie and she denies having written anything of the sort. It's evidently a forgery.

(He takes out the copy from the papers in front of him and hands it to Ong Chi Seng. *The Chinaman ignores the gesture.)*

Ong Chi Seng

In that case, sir, I suppose there would be no objection if my friend delivered the letter to the Public Prosecutor.

Joyce

None. But I don't quite see what good that would do your friend.

Ong Chi Seng

My friend thought it was his duty, sir, in the interests of justice.

Joyce

(Grimly.) I am the last man in the world to interfere with any one who wishes to do his duty, Ong.

Ong Chi Seng

I quite understand, sir, but from my study of the case, *R. v. Crosbie,* I am of the opinion that the production of such a letter would be damaging to our client.

Joyce

I have always had a high opinion of your legal acumen, Ong Chi Seng.

Ong Chi Seng

It has occurred to me, sir, that if I could persuade my friend to induce the Chinese woman who has the letter to deliver it into our hands it would save a great deal of trouble.

Joyce

I suppose your friend is a business man. Under what circumstances do you think he would be induced to part with the letter?

Ong Chi Seng

He has not got the letter.

Joyce

Oh, has he got a friend, too?

Ong Chi Seng

The Chinese woman has got the letter. He is only a relation of the Chinese woman. She is an ignorant woman; she did not know the value of the letter till my friend told her.

Joyce

What value did he put on it?

Ong Chi Seng

Ten thousand dollars, sir.

Joyce

Good God! Where on earth do you suppose Mrs. Crosbie can get ten thousand dollars? I tell you the letter's a forgery.

Ong Chi Seng

Mr. Crosbie owns an eighth share of the Bekong Rubber Estate, and a sixth share of the Kelanton River Rubber Estate. I have a friend who will lend him the money on the security of his properties.

Joyce

You have a large circle of acquaintances, Ong.

Ong Chi Seng

Yes, sir.

Joyce

Well, you can tell them all to go to hell. I would never advise Mr. Crosbie to give a penny more than five thousand for a letter that can be very easily explained.

Ong Chi Seng

The Chinese woman does not want to sell the letter, sir. My friend took a long time to persuade her. It is useless to offer her less than the sum mentioned.

Joyce

Ten thousand dollars is an awful lot.

Ong Chi Seng

Mr. Crosbie will certainly pay it rather than see his wife hanged by the neck, sir.

Joyce

Why did your friend fix upon that particular amount?

Ong Chi Seng

I will not attempt to conceal anything from you, sir. Upon making enquiry, sir, my friend came to the conclusion that ten thousand dollars was the largest sum Mr. Crosbie could possibly get.

Joyce

Ah, that is precisely what occurred to me. Well, I will speak to Mr. Crosbie.

Ong Chi Seng

Mr. Crosbie is still here, sir.

Joyce

Oh! What's he doing?

Ong Chi Seng

We have only a very short time, sir, and the matter, in my opinion, brooks of no delay.

Joyce

In that case be brief, Ong.

Ong Chi Seng

It occurred to me that you would wish to speak to Mr. Crosbie and, therefore, I took the liberty of asking him to wait. If it would be convenient for you to speak to him now, sir, I could impart your decision to my friend when I have my tiffin.

Joyce

Where is the Chinese woman now?

Ong Chi Seng

She is staying in the house of my friend, sir.

Joyce

Will she come to my office?

Ong Chi Seng

I think it more better you go to her, sir. I can take you to the house to-night, and she will give you the letter. She is a very ignorant woman and she does not understand cheques.

Joyce

I wasn't thinking of giving her a cheque. I should bring banknotes with me.

Ong Chi Seng

It would only be waste of time to bring less than ten thousand dollars, sir.

Joyce

I quite understand.

Ong Chi Seng

Shall I tell Mr. Crosbie that you wish to see him, sir?

Joyce

Ong Chi Seng.

Ong Chi Seng

Yes, sir.

Joyce

Is there anything else you know?

Ong Chi Seng

No, sir. I am of the opinion that a confidential clerk should have no secrets from his employer. May I ask why you make this enquiry, sir?

Joyce

Call Mr. Crosbie.

Ong Chi Seng

Very good, sir.

(He goes out, and in a moment opens the door once more for Crosbie.*)*

Joyce

It's good of you to have waited, old man.

Crosbie

Your clerk said that you particularly wished me to.

Joyce

(As casually as he can.) A rather unpleasant thing has happened, Bob. It appears that your wife sent a letter to Hammond asking him to come to the bungalow on the night he was killed.

Crosbie

But that's impossible. She's always stated that she had had no communication with Hammond. I know from my own knowledge that she hadn't set eyes upon him for a couple of months.

Joyce

The fact remains that the letter exists. It's in the possession of the Chinese woman Hammond was living with.

Crosbie

What did she write to him for?

Joyce

Your wife meant to give you a present on your birthday, and she wanted Hammond to help her to get it. Your birthday was just about then, wasn't it?

Crosbie

Yes. In point of fact it was a fortnight ago to-day.

Joyce

In the emotional excitement that she suffered from after the tragedy she forgot that she'd written a letter to him, and having once

denied having any communication with Hammond she was afraid to say she'd made a mistake.

Crosbie

Why?

Joyce

My dear fellow. It was, of course, very unfortunate, but I daresay it was not unnatural.

Crosbie

That's unlike Leslie. I've never known her afraid of anything.

Joyce

The circumstances were exceptional.

Crosbie

Does it very much matter? If she's asked about it she can explain.

Joyce

It would be very awkward if this letter found its way into the hands of the prosecution. Your wife has lied, and she would be asked some difficult questions.

Crosbie

Leslie would never tell a lie intentionally.

Joyce

(With a shadow of impatience.) My dear Bob, you must try to understand. Don't you see that it alters things a good deal if Hammond did not intrude, an unwanted guest, but came to your house by invitation? It would be easy to arouse in the jury a certain indecision of mind.

Crosbie

I may be very stupid, but I don't understand. You lawyers, you seem to take a delight in making mountains out of mole-heaps. After all, Howard, you're not only my lawyer, you're the oldest friend I have in the world.

Joyce

I know. That is why I'm taking a step the gravity of which I can never expect you to realise. I think we must get hold of that letter. I want you to authorise me to buy it.

Crosbie

I'll do whatever you think is right.

Joyce

I don't think it's right, but I think it's expedient. Juries are very stupid. I think it's just as well not to worry them with more evidence than they can conveniently deal with.

Crosbie

Well, I don't pretend to understand, but I'm perfectly prepared to leave myself in your hands. Go ahead and do as you think fit. I'll pay.

Joyce

All right. And now put the matter out of your mind.

Crosbie

That's easy. I could never bring myself to believe that Leslie had ever done anything that wasn't absolutely square and above board.

Joyce

Let's go to the club. I badly want a whiskey and soda.

THE END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

Scene I

Scene: *The scene is a small room in the Chinese quarter of Singapore. The walls are whitewashed, but dirty and bedraggled, on one of them hangs a cheap Chinese oleograph, stained and discoloured; on another, unframed and pinned up, a picture of a nude from one of the illustrated papers. The only furniture consists of a sandalwood box and a low Chinese pallet bed, with a lacquered neck-rest. There is a closed window, which is at the back, and a door on the right. It is night and the room is lit by one electric light, a globe without a shade. When the Curtain rises* Chung Hi *is lying on the pallet bed, with his opium pipe, his lamp, and the tray on which are the little tin of opium and a couple of long needles. He is reading a Chinese paper. He is a fat Chinaman in white trousers and a singlet. On his feet are Chinese slippers. A* Boy *dressed in the same way, is seated on the sandalwood chest idly playing a Chinese flute. He plays a strange Chinese tune. Chung Hi dips his needle in the opium and heats it over the flame of*

the lamp, puts it in the pipe, inhales and presently blows out a thick cloud of smoke. There is a scratching at the door. Chung Hi speaks a few words in Chinese and the Boy *goes to it and just opens it. The* Boy *speaks to the person there and still from the door says something to* Chung Hi. Chung Hi *makes answer and gets up from the pallet bed, putting his opium things aside. The door is opened wider and* Ong Chi Seng *comes in.*

Ong Chi Seng

This way, sir, please. Come in.

*(*Joyce *enters, wearing his topee.)*

Joyce

I nearly broke my neck on those stairs.

Ong Chi Seng

This is my friend, sir.

Joyce

Does he speak English?

Chung Hi

Yes, my speakee velly good English. How do you do, sir. I hope you are quite well. Please to come in.

Joyce

Good evening. I say, the air in here is awful. Couldn't we have the window open?

Chung Hi

Night air velly bad, sir. Him bring fever.

Joyce

We'll risk it.

Ong Chi Seng

Very good, sir. I will open the window. *(He goes to it and does so.)*

Joyce

(Taking off his topee and putting it down.) I see you've been smoking.

Chung Hi

Yes, my suffer velly bad from my belly. Smokee two, thlee pipes make it more better.

Joyce

We'd better get to our business.

Ong Chi Seng

Yes, sir. Business is business, as we say.

Joyce

What is your friend's name, Ong?

Chung Hi

My callee all same Chung Hi. You no see him written on shop? Chung Hi. General dealer?

Joyce

I suppose you know what I've come for?

Chung Hi

Yes, sir. My velly glad to see you in my house. My give you my business card. Yes?

Joyce

I don't think I need it.

Chung Hi

My sell you velly good China tea. All same Suchong. Number one quality. My can sell more cheap than you buy at stores.

Joyce

I don't want any tea.

Chung Hi

My sell you Swatow silk. Velly best quality. No can get more better in China. Make velly good suits. My sell you cheap.

Joyce

I don't want any silk.

Chung Hi

Velly well. You take my business card. Chung Hi, General Dealer, 264 Victoria Street. Maybe you want some tomollow or next day.

Joyce

Have you got this letter?

Chung Hi

Chinese woman have got.

Joyce

Where is she?

Chung Hi

She come presently.

Joyce

Why the devil isn't she here?

Chung Hi

She here all night. She come presently. She wait till you come. See?

Ong Chi Seng

More better you tell her to come, I think.

Chung Hi

Yes, I tell her come this minute. *(He speaks to the* Boy *in Chinese, who gives a guttural, monosyllabic reply and goes out.) (To* Joyce.*)* You sit down. Yes?

Joyce

I prefer to stand.

Chung Hi

(Handing him a green tin of cigarettes.) You smokee cigarette. Velly good cigarette. All same Thlee Castles.

Joyce

I don't want to smoke.

Chung Hi

(*To* Joyce.) You wantchee buy China tea velly cheap. Number one quality.

Joyce

Go to hell.

Chung Hi

All light. My no savee. Maybe you likee Swatow silk. No! You wantchee see jade? Have got string number one quality. My sell you one thousand dollars. Velly nice plesent your missus.

Joyce

Go to hell.

Chung Hi

All light. I smokee cigarette.

(*The door is opened and the* Boy *comes in again with a tray on which are bowls of tea. He takes it to* Joyce, *who shakes his head and turns away. The others help themselves.)*

Joyce

Why the devil doesn't this woman come?

Ong Chi Seng

I think she come now, sir.

(There is a scratching at the door.)

Joyce

I'm curious to see her.

Ong Ci Seng

My fliend say that poor Mr. Hammond deceased was completely under her thumb, sir.

Chung Hi

She no speakee English. She speakee Malay and Chinese.

(Meanwhile the Boy *has gone to the door and opened it. The* Chinese Woman *comes in. She wears a silk sarong and a long muslin coat over a blouse. On her arms are heavy gold bangles; she wears a gold chain round her neck and gold pins in her shining, black hair. Her cheeks and mouth are painted, and she is heavily powdered; arched eyebrows make a thin dark line over her eyes. She comes in and walks slowly to the pallet bed and sits on the edge of it with her legs dangling. Ong Chi Seng makes an observation to her in Chinese, and she briefly answers. She takes no notice of the white man.)*

Joyce

Has she got the letter?

Ong Chi Seng

Yes, sir.

Joyce

Where is it?

Ong Chi Seng

She's a very ignorant woman, sir. I think she wants to see the money before she gives the letter.

Joyce

Very well.

(The Chinese Woman *takes a cigarette from the tin and lights it. She appears to take no notice of what is proceeding.* Joyce *counts out the ten thousand dollars and hands them to* Ong Chi Seng. Ong Chi Seng *counts them for himself, while* Chung Hi *watches him. They are all grave, businesslike, and the Chinese are oddly unconcerned.)*

Ong Chi Seng

The sum is quite correct, sir.

(The Chinese Woman *takes the letter from her tunic and hands it to* Ong Chi Seng. Ong Chi Seng *gives it a glance.)*

This is the right document, sir.

(He hands it to Joyce, *who reads it silently.)*

Joyce

There's not very much for the money.

Ong Chi Seng

I am sure that you will not regret it, sir. Considering all the circumstances, it is what you call dirt cheap.

Joyce

(Ironically.) I know that you have too great a regard for me to allow me to pay more for an article than the market price.

Ong Chi Seng

Shall you want me for anything else to-night, please, sir?

Joyce

I don't think so.

Ong Chi Seng

In that case, sir, if it is convenient, I will stay here and talk to my friend.

Joyce

(Sardonically.) I suppose you want to divide the swag.

Ong Chi Seng

I am sorry, sir, that that is a word I have not come across in my studies.

Joyce

You'd better look it out in the dictionary.

Ong Chi Seng

Yes, sir. I will do it without delay.

Joyce

I have been wondering how much you were going to get out of this, Ong Chi Seng.

Ong Chi Seng

The labourer is worthy of his hire, as Our Lord said, sir.

Joyce

I didn't know you were a Christian, Ong.

Ong Chi Seng

I am not, sir, to the best of my belief.

Joyce

In that case he certainly isn't your Lord.

Ong Chi Seng

I was only making use of the common English idiom, sir. In point of fact, I am a disciple of the late Herbert Spencer. I have also been much influenced by Nietzsche, Shaw and Herbert G. Wells.

Joyce

It is no wonder that I am no match for you.

(As he goes out the curtain falls quickly.)

Scene II

Scene: *The scene is the same as in Act I. The sitting-room at the Crosbies' bungalow.*

It is about five o'clock in the afternoon and the light is soft and mellow.

When the Curtain rises the stage is empty, but immediately the sound is heard of a car stopping, and Mrs. Joyce *and* Withers *come up the steps of the verandah and enter the room. They are followed in an instant by the* Head Boy *and another Chinese servant, one with a suit-case and the other with a large basket.* Mrs. Joyce *is a buxom, florid, handsome woman of about forty.*

Mrs. Joyce

Good gracious, how desolate the place looks. You can see in the twinkling of an eye that there hasn't been a woman here to look after things.

Withers

I must say it does look a bit dreary.

Mrs. Joyce

I knew it. I felt it in my bones. That's why I wanted to get here before Leslie. I thought we might have a chance to do a little something before she came.

(She goes over to the piano, opens it and puts a piece of music on the stand.)

Withers

A few flowers would help.

Mrs. Joyce

I wonder if these wretched boys will have had the sense to pick some. *(To the* Head-Boy *who bears the basket.)* Is the ice all right, boy?

Head-Boy

Yes, missy.

Mrs. Joyce

Well, put it in some place where it won't melt. Are there any flowers?

Head-Boy

My lookee see.

Mrs. Joyce

(To the other boy.) Oh, that's my bag. Put it in the spare room.

(The two servants go out.)

Withers

You know, I can't help wondering how Mrs. Crosbie can bring herself to come back here.

Mrs. Joyce

My poor friend, the Crosbies haven't got half a dozen houses to choose from. When you've only one house I suppose you've got to live in it no matter what's happened.

Withers

At all events I should have liked to wait a bit.

Mrs. Joyce

I wanted her to. I'd made all my plans for them both to come back to my house after the trial. I wanted them to stay with me till they were able to get away for a holiday.

Withers

I should have thought that much the most sensible thing to do.

Mrs. Joyce

But they wouldn't. Bob said he couldn't leave the estate and Leslie said she couldn't leave Bob. So then I said Howard and I would come down here. I thought it would be easier for them if they had some one with them for a day or two.

Withers

(With a smile.) And I think you were determined not to be robbed of your celebration.

Mrs. Joyce

(Gaily.) You don't know my million-dollar cocktails, do you? They're celebrated all through the F.M.S. When Leslie was arrested I made a solemn vow that I wouldn't make another until she was acquitted. I've been waiting for this day and no one is going to deprive me of my treat.

Withers

Hence the ice, I suppose?

Mrs. Joyce

Hence the ice, wise young man. As soon as the others come I'll start making them.

Withers

With your own hands?

Mrs. Joyce

With my own hands. I don't mind telling you I never knew any one who could make a better cocktail than I can.

Withers

(With a grin.) We all think the cocktails we make ourselves better than anybody else's, you know.

Mrs. Joyce

(Merrily.) Yes, but you're all lamentably mistaken, and I happen to be right.

Withers

The ways of Providence are dark.

(The two boys come in with bowls of flowers. They place them here and there, so that the room looks exactly as it did during the first act.)

Mrs. Joyce

Oh, good. That makes the room look much more habitable.

Withers

They ought to be here in a minute.

Mrs. Joyce

We went very fast, you know. And I daresay a good many people wanted to say a word or two to Leslie. I don't suppose they were able to get away as quickly as they expected.

(The boys go out.)

Withers

I'll wait till they come, shall I?

Mrs. Joyce

Of course you must wait.

Withers

I thought the Attorney-General was very decent.

Mrs. Joyce

I knew he would be. I know his wife, you know. She said she thought Leslie should never be tried at all. But, of course, men are so funny.

Withers

I shall never forget the shout that went up when the jury came in and said, "Not guilty."

Mrs. Joyce

It was thrilling, wasn't it? And Leslie absolutely impassive, sitting there as though it had nothing to do with her.

Withers

I can't get over the way she gave her evidence. By George, she's a marvel.

Mrs. Joyce

It was beautiful. I couldn't help crying. It was so modest and so restrained. Howard, who thinks me very hysterical and impulsive, told me the other day he'd never known a woman who had so much self-control as Leslie. And that's real praise, because I don't think he very much likes her.

Withers

Why not?

Mrs. Joyce

Oh, you know what men are. They never care very much for the women their particular friends marry.

(The Head-Boy *comes in with a pillow covered by a cloth.)*

Withers

Hulloa, what's this?

Head-Boy

Missy pillow lace.

Mrs. Joyce

(Going to it and taking the cloth off.) Oh, did you bring that?

Head-Boy

I thought maybe Missy wantchee.

(He puts it down on the table on which it stood in the first act.)

Mrs. Joyce

I'm sure she will. That was very thoughtful of you, boy. *(To* Withers *as the boy goes out.)* You know, sometimes you could kill these Chinese boys, and then all of a sudden they'll do things that are so kind and so considerate that you forgive them everything.

Withers

(Looking at the lace.) By George, it is beautiful, isn't it? You know, it's just the sort of thing you'd expect her to do.

Mrs. Joyce

Mr. Withers, I want to ask you something rather horrible. When you came that night, where exactly was Geoff Hammond's body lying?

Withers

Out on the verandah, just under that lamp. By God, it gave me a turn when I ran up the steps and nearly fell over him.

Mrs. Joyce

Has it occurred to you that every time Leslie comes into the house she'll have to step over the place where the body lay? It's rather grim.

Withers

Perhaps it won't strike her.

Mrs. Joyce

Fortunately she's not the sort of hysterical fool that I am. But I—oh, dear, I could never sleep again.

(There is the sound of a car driving up.)

Withers

There they are. They haven't been so long, after all.

Mrs. Joyce

(Going over to the verandah.) No, they must have started within ten minutes of us. *(Calling.)* Leslie! Leslie!

*(*Leslie *comes in, followed by* Crosbie *and* Joyce. Crosbie *is wearing a neat suit of ducks.* Leslie *wears a silk wrap and a hat.)*

Leslie

You haven't been here long, have you?

Mrs. Joyce

(Taking her in her arms.) Welcome. Welcome back to your home.

Leslie

(Releasing herself.) Darling. *(She looks round.)* How nice and cosy it looks. I can hardly realise that I've ever been away.

Mrs. Joyce

Are you tired? Would you like to go and lie down?

Leslie

Tired? Why, I've been doing nothing but rest for the last six weeks.

Mrs. Joyce

Oh, Bob, aren't you happy to have her back again?

Joyce

Now, Dorothy, don't gush, and if you must gush, gush over me.

Mrs. Joyce

I'm not going to gush over you, you old brute. What have you done?

Leslie

(*Holding out her hand to him, with a charming smile.*) He's done everything. I can never thank him enough. You don't know what he's been to me through all this dreary time of waiting.

Mrs. Joyce

I don't mind confessing that I thought you made rather a good speech, Howard.

Joyce

Thank you for those kind words.

Mrs. Joyce

I think perhaps you might have been a little more impassioned without hurting yourself.

Withers

I don't agree with you, Mrs. Joyce. It's just because it was so cold and measured and businesslike that it was so effective.

Joyce

Let's have this drink you've been talking about, Dorothy.

Mrs. Joyce

Come and help me, Mr. Withers. When I make a cocktail I want a great many assistants.

Leslie

(Taking off her hat.) I know what an elaborate business your million-dollar cocktail is, Dorothy.

Mrs. Joyce

(As she goes out with Withers.*)* Don't be impatient. I can't hurry it. I must take my time.

Leslie

I'll go and tidy myself up.

Crosbie

You don't need it. You look as if you'd just come out of a bandbox.

Leslie

I shan't be a minute.

Crosbie

There's something I particularly want to say to you.

Joyce

I'll make myself scarce.

Crosbie

No, I want you, old man. I want your legal opinion.

Joyce

Oh, do you? Fire away.

Crosbie

Well, look here, I want to get Leslie away from here as quickly as possible.

Joyce

I think a bit of a holiday would do you both good.

Leslie

Could you get away, Robert? Even if it's only for two or three weeks I'd be thankful.

Crosbie

What's the use of two or three weeks? We must get away for good.

Leslie

But how can we?

Joyce

You can't very well throw up a job like this. You'd never get such a good one again, you know.

Crosbie

That's where you're wrong. I've got something in view that's much better. We can neither of us live here. It would be impossible. We've gone through too much in this bungalow. How can we ever forget. . . .

Leslie

(With a shudder.) No, don't, Bob, don't.

Crosbie

(To Joyce.*)* You see. Heaven knows, Leslie has nerves of iron, but there is a limit to human endurance. You know how lonely the life is. I should never have a moment's peace when I was out and thought of her sitting in this room by herself. It's out of the question.

Leslie

Oh, don't think of me, Bob. You've made this estate, it was nothing when you came here. Why, it's like your child. It's the apple of your eye.

Crosbie

I hate it now. I hate every tree on it. I must get away, and so must you. You don't want to stay?

Leslie

It's all been so miserable. I don't want to make any more difficulties.

Crosbie

I know our only chance of peace is to get to some place where we can forget

Joyce

But could you get another job?

Crosbie

Yes, that's just it. Something has suddenly cropped up. That's why I wanted to talk to you about it at once. It's in Sumatra. We'd be right away from everybody, and the only people round us would be Dutch. We'd start a new life, with new friends. The only thing is that you'd be awfully lonely, darling.

Leslie

Oh, I wouldn't mind that. I'm used to loneliness. *(With sudden vehemence.)* I'd be glad to go, Robert. I don't want to stay here.

Crosbie

That settles it then. I'll go straight ahead and we can fix things up at once.

Joyce

Is the money as good as here?

Crosbie

I hope it'll be better. At all events I shall be working for myself and not for a rotten company in London.

Joyce

(Startled.) What do you mean by that? You're not buying an estate?

Crosbie

Yes, I am. Why should I go on sweating my life out for other people? It's a chance in a thousand. It belongs to a Malacca Chinaman who's in financial difficulties, and he's willing to let it go for thirty thousand dollars if he can have the money the day after to-morrow.

Joyce

But how are you going to raise thirty thousand dollars?

Crosbie

Well, I've saved about ten thousand since I've been in the East, and Charlie Meadows is willing to let me have the balance on mortgage.

*(*Leslie *and* Joyce *exchange a glance of consternation.)*

Joyce

It seems rather rash to put all your eggs in one basket.

Leslie

I shouldn't like you to take such a risk on my account, Robert. You needn't worry about me, really. I shall settle down here quite comfortably.

Crosbie

Don't talk nonsense, darling. It's only a moment ago that you said you'd give anything to clear out.

Leslie

I spoke without thinking. I believe it would be a mistake to run away. The sensible thing to do is to sit tight. Everybody's been so kind, there's no reason to suppose they're not going to continue. I'm sure all our friends will do all they can to make things easy for us.

Crosbie

You know, dear, you mustn't be frightened at a little risk. It's only if one takes risks that one can make big money.

Joyce

These Chinese estates are never any good. You know how haphazard and careless the Chinese are.

Crosbie

This is not that sort of thing at all. It belongs to a very progressive Chinaman, and he's had a European manager. It's not a leap in the dark. It's a thoroughly sound proposition, and I reckon that in ten years I can make enough money to allow us to retire. Then we'll settle down in England and live like lords.

Leslie

Honestly, Robert, I'd prefer to stay here. I'm attached to the place, and when I've had time to forget all that has happened . . . .

Crosbie

How can you forget?

Joyce

Anyhow, it's not a thing that you must enter into without due consideration. You'd naturally want to go over to Sumatra and look for yourself.

Crosbie

That's just it. I've got to make up my mind at once. The offer only holds for thirty-six hours.

Joyce

But, my dear fellow, you can't pay thirty thousand dollars for an estate without proper investigation. None of you planters are any too businesslike, but really there are limits.

Crosbie

Don't try to make me out a bigger fool than I am. I've had it examined and it's worth fifty thousand if it's worth a dollar. I've got all the papers in my office. I'll go and get them and you can see for yourself. And I have a couple of photographs of the bungalow to show Leslie.

Leslie

I don't want to see them.

Crosbie

Oh, come, darling. That's just nerves. That shows how necessary it is for you to get away. Darling, in this case you must let me have my own way. I want to go, too. I can't stay here any more.

Leslie

(With anguish.) Oh, why are you so obstinate?

Crosbie

Come, come, dear, don't be unreasonable. Let me go and get the papers. I shan't be a minute.

(He goes out. There is a moment's silence. Leslie *looks at* Joyce *with terrified appeal; he makes a despairing gesture.)*

Joyce

I had to pay ten thousand dollars for the letter.

Leslie

What are you going to do?

Joyce

(Miserably.) What can I do?

Leslie

Oh, don't tell him now. Give me a little time. I'm at the end of my strength. I can't bear anything more.

Joyce

You heard what he said. He wants the money at once to buy this estate. He can't He hasn't got it.

Leslie

Give me a little time.

Joyce

I can't afford to give you a sum like that.

Leslie

No, I don't expect you to. Perhaps I can get it somehow.

Joyce

How? You know it's impossible. It's money I put by for the education of my boys. I was glad to advance it, and I wouldn't have minded waiting a few weeks . . . .

Leslie

(Interrupting.) If you'd only give me a month I'd have time to think of something. I could prepare Robert and explain to him by degrees. I'd watch for my opportunity.

Joyce

If he buys this estate the money will be gone. No, no, no. I can't let him do that. I don't want to be unkind to you, but I can't lose my money.

Leslie

Where is the letter?

Joyce

I have it in my pocket.

Leslie

Oh, what shall I do?

Joyce

I'm dreadfully sorry for you.

Leslie

Oh, don't be sorry for me. I don't matter. It's Robert. It'll break his heart.

Joyce

If there were only some other way. I don't know what to do.

Leslie

I suppose you're right. There's only one thing to do. Tell him. Tell him and have done with it. I'm broken.

*(*Crosbie *comes in again with a bundle of papers in his hand and two large photographs.)*

Crosbie

Of course if it hadn't been for Leslie I should have run over to Sumatra last week. I'd just like you to have a look first at the report I've had.

Joyce

Look here, Bob, has it struck you that your costs over this affair will be pretty heavy?

Crosbie

I know all you lawyers are robbers. I daresay this will leave me a little short of ready money, but I don't suppose you'll mind if I keep you waiting till I've had time to settle down. You know I can be trusted, and if you like I'll pay you interest.

Joyce

I don't think you have any idea how large the sum is. Of course, we don't want to press you, but we can't be out of our money indefinitely. I think I should warn you that when you've settled with us, you won't have much money left over to embark in rather hazardous speculations.

Crosbie

You're putting the fear of God into me. How much will the costs come to?

Joyce

I'm not going to charge you anything for my personal services. Whatever I've done has been done out of pure friendship, but there are certain out-of-pocket expenses that I'm afraid you must pay.

Crosbie

Of course. It's awfully good of you not to wish to charge me for anything else. I hardly like to accept. What do the out-of-pocket expenses amount to?

Joyce

You remember that I told you yesterday that there was a letter of Leslie's that I thought we ought to get hold of.

Crosbie

Yes. I really didn't think it mattered very much, but, of course, I put myself in your hands. I thought you were making a great deal out of something that wasn't very important.

Joyce

You told me to do what I thought fit, and I bought the letter from the person in whose possession it was. I had to pay a great deal of money for it.

Crosbie

What a bore. Still, if you thought it necessary, I'm not going to grouse. How much was it?

Joyce

I'm afraid I had to pay ten thousand dollars for it.

Crosbie

(Aghast.) Ten thousand dollars! Why, that's a fortune. I thought you were going to say a couple of hundred. You must have been mad.

Joyce

You may be quite sure that I wouldn't have given it if I could have got it for less.

Crosbie

But that's everything I have in the world. It reduces me to beggary.

Joyce

Not that exactly, but you must understand that you haven't got money to buy an estate with.

Crosbie

But why didn't you let them bring the letter in and tell them to do what they damned well liked?

Joyce

I didn't dare.

Crosbie

Do you mean to say it was absolutely necessary to suppress the letter?

Joyce

If you wanted your wife acquitted.

Crosbie

But . . . but. . . I don't understand. You're not going to tell me that they could have brought in a verdict of guilty. They couldn't have hanged her for putting a noxious vermin out of the way.

Joyce

Of course, they wouldn't have hanged her. But they might have found her guilty of manslaughter. I daresay she'd have got off with two or three years.

Crosbie

Three years. My Leslie. My little Leslie. It would have killed her . . . . But what was there in the letter?

Joyce

I told you yesterday.

Leslie

It was very stupid of me. I . . . .

Crosbie

(Interrupting.) I remember now. You wrote to Hammond to ask him to come to the bungalow.

Leslie

Yes.

Crosbie

You wanted him to get something for you, didn't you?

Leslie

Yes, I wanted to get a present for your birthday.

Crosbie

Why should you have asked him?

Leslie

I wanted to get you a gun. He knew all about that sort of thing, and you know how ignorant I am.

Crosbie

Bertie Cameron had a brand new gun he wanted to sell. I went into Singapore on the night of Hammond's death to buy it. Why should you want to make me a present of another?

Leslie

How should I know that you were going to buy a gun?

Crosbie

(Abruptly.) Because I told you.

Leslie

I'd forgotten. I can't remember everything.

Crosbie

You hadn't forgotten that

Leslie

What do you mean, Robert? Why are you talking to me like this?

Crosbie

(To Joyce*.)* Wasn't it a criminal offence that you committed in buying that letter?

Joyce

(Trying not to take it seriously.) It's not the sort of thing that a respectable lawyer does in the ordinary way of business.

Crosbie

(Pressing him.) It was a criminal offence?

Joyce

I've been trying to keep the fact out of my mind. But if you insist on a straight answer I'm afraid I must admit it was.

Crosbie

Then why did you do it? You, you of all people. What were you trying to save me from?

Joyce

Well, I've told you. I felt that . . . .

Crosbie

(Hard and stem.) No, you haven't.

Joyce

Come, come, Bob, don't be a fool. I don't know what you mean. Juries are very stupid, and you don't want to let them get any silly ideas in their heads.

Crosbie

Who has the letter now? Have you got it?

Joyce

Yes.

Crosbie

Where is it?

Joyce

Why do you want to know?

Crosbie

(Violently.) God damn it, I want to see it.

Joyce

I've got no right to show it you.

Crosbie

Is it your money you bought it with, or mine? I've got to pay ten thousand dollars for that letter, and, by God, I'm going to see it. At least I'd like to know that I've had my money's worth.

Leslie

Let him see it.

(Without a word Joyce *takes his pocketbook from his pocket and takes out the letter. He hands it to* Crosbie. *He reads it.)*

Crosbie

(Hoarsely.) What does it mean?

Leslie

It means that Geoff Hammond was my lover.

Crosbie

(Covering his face with his hands.) No, no, no.

Joyce

Why did you kill him?

Leslie

He'd been my lover for years. He became my lover almost immediately after he came back from the war.

Crosbie

(In agony.) It's not true.

Leslie

I used to drive out to a place we knew and he met me, two or three times a week, and when Robert went to Singapore he used to come to the bungalow late, when the boys had gone for the night. We saw one another, constantly, all the time.

Crosbie

I trusted you. I loved you.

Leslie

And then lately, a year ago, he began to change. I didn't know what was the matter. I couldn't believe that he didn't care for me any more. I was frantic. Oh, if you knew what agonies I endured. I passed through hell. I knew he didn't want me any more, and I wouldn't let him go. Sometimes I thought he hated me. Misery! Misery! I loved him. I didn't want to love him. I couldn't help myself. I hated myself for loving him, and yet he was everything in the world to me. He was all my life.

Crosbie

Oh, God! Oh, God!

Leslie

And then I heard he was living with a Chinese woman. I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it. At last I saw her, I saw her with my own eyes, walking in the village, with her gold bracelets and her necklaces—a Chinese woman. Horrible! They all knew in the kampong that she was his mistress. And when I passed her, she looked at me, and I saw that she knew I was his mistress too.

Crosbie

Oh, the shame.

Leslie

I sent for him. I told him I must see him. You've read the letter. I was mad to write it. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't care. I

hadn't seen him for ten days. It was a lifetime. And when last we'd parted he held me in his arms and kissed me, and told me not to worry. And he went straight from my arms to hers.

Joyce

He was a rotter. He always was.

Leslie

That letter. We'd always been so careful. He always tore up any word I wrote to him the moment he'd read it. How was I to know he'd leave that one?

Joyce

That doesn't matter now.

Leslie

He came, and I told him I knew about the Chinawoman. He denied it. He said it was only scandal. I was beside myself. I don't know what I said to him. Oh, I hated him then. I hated him because he'd made me despise myself. I tore him limb from limb. I said everything I could to wound him. I insulted him. I could have spat in his face. And at last he turned on me. He told me he was sick and tired of me and never wanted to see me again. He said I bored him to death. And then he acknowledged that it was true about the Chinawoman. He said he'd known her for years, and she was the only woman who really meant anything to him, and the rest was just pastime. And he said he was glad I knew, and now, at last, I'd leave him alone. He said things to me that I thought it impossible a man could ever say to a woman. He couldn't have been more vile if I'd been a harlot on the streets. And then I don't know what happened; I was beside myself; I seized the revolver and fired. He gave a cry and I saw I'd hit him. He staggered and rushed for the verandah. I ran after him and fired again. He fell, and then I stood over him, and I fired and fired till there were no more cartridges.

(There is a pause and then Crosbie goes up to her.)

Crosbie

Have I deserved this of you, Leslie?

Leslie

No. I've been vile. I have no excuses to offer for myself. I betrayed you.

Crosbie

What do you want to do now?

Leslie

It is for you to say.

Crosbie

It was for your sake I wanted to go away. I only saved that money for you. I shall have to stay here now, but I could manage to give you enough to live on in England.

Leslie

Where am I to go? I have no family left and no friends. I'm quite alone in the world. Oh, I'm so unhappy.

Crosbie

How could you, Leslie? What did I do wrong that I couldn't win your love?

Leslie

What can I say? It wasn't me that deceived you. It wasn't me that loved that other. It was a madness that seized me, and I was as little my own mistress as though I were delirious with fever. It brought me no happiness, that love—it only brought me shame and remorse.

Crosbie

The awful part is that notwithstanding everything —I love you still. Oh, God, how you must despise me. I despise myself.

*(*Leslie *shakes her head slowly.)*

Leslie

I don't know what I've done to deserve your love. I'm worthless. Oh, if only I could blame anybody but myself. I can't I deserve everything I have to suffer. Oh, Robert, my dear.

(He turns aside and buries his head in his hands.)

Crosbie

Oh, what shall I do. It's all gone. All gone.

(He begins to sob with the great, painful, difficult sobs of a man unused to tears. She sinks on her knees beside him.)

Leslie

Oh, don't cry. Darling. Darling.

(He springs up and pushes her on one side.)

Crosbie

I'm a fool. There's no need for me to make an exhibition of myself. I'm sorry.

(He goes hastily out of the room. Leslie *rises to her feet.)*

Joyce

Don't go to him. Give him a moment to get hold of himself.

Leslie

I'm so dreadfully sorry for him.

Joyce

He's going to forgive you. He can't do without you.

Leslie

If he'd only give me another chance.

Joyce

Don't you love him at all?

Leslie

No. I wish to God I did.

Joyce

Then what's to be done?

Leslie

I'll give my life such as it is to him, to him only. I swear to you that I'll do everything in the world to make him happy. I'll make amends. I'll oblige him to forget. He shall never know that I don't love him as he wants to be loved.

Joyce

It's not easy to live with a man you don't love. But you've had the courage and the strength to do evil; perhaps you will have the courage and the strength to do good. That will be your retribution.

Leslie

No, that won't be my retribution. I can do that and do it gladly. He's so kind, he's so tender. My retribution is greater. With all my heart I still love the man I killed.

THE END

APPENDIX

Since a play is published not only to gratify an author's vanity, but also for the convenience of amateurs, I have thought it well to print here the version acted at The Playhouse. After two or three rehearsals, I replaced Leslie Crosbie's final confession with a "throwback," because I thought it would bore an audience to listen to two long

narratives in one play. I have a notion that an author may prudently take a risk to avoid tediousness.

(Without a word Joyce *takes his pocket-book from his pocket and takes out the letter. He hands it to* Crosbie*. He reads it.)*

Crosbie

(Hoarsely.) What does it mean?

Leslie

It means that Geoff Hammond was my lover.

Crosbie

(Covering his face with his hands.) No, no.

Joyce

Why did you kill him?

Leslie

He'd been my lover for years.

Crosbie

(In agony.) It's not true.

Leslie

For years. And then he changed. I didn't know what was the matter. I couldn't believe that he didn't care for me any more. I loved him; I didn't want to love him. I couldn't help myself. I hated myself for loving him, and yet he was everything in the world to me. He was all my life. And then I heard he was living with a Chinese woman. I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it. At last I saw her, I saw her with my own eyes, walking in the village, with her gold bracelets and her necklaces—a Chinese woman. Horrible! They all knew in the kampong that she was his mistress. And when I passed her, she looked at me, and I saw that she knew I was his mistress, too. I sent for him.

(The stage darkens for a moment. When the lights go up again Leslie, *wearing the dress she wore in the first act, is seen seated at the table working at her lace.* Geoffrey Hammond *comes in. He is a good-looking fellow in the late thirties, with a breezy manner and abundant self-confidence.)*

Leslie

Geoff! I thought you were never coming.

Hammond

What's that bold bad husband of yours gone to Singapore for?

Leslie

He's gone to buy a gun that Bertie Cameron wants to sell.

Hammond

I suppose he wants to bag that tiger the natives are talking about. I bet I get him first. What about a little drink?

Leslie

Help yourself.

(He goes to a table and pours himself out a whiskey and soda.)

Hammond

I say, is anything the matter? That note of yours was rather hectic.

Leslie

What have you done with it?

Hammond

I tore it up at once. What do you take me for?

Leslie

(Suddenly.) Geoff, I can't go on like this any more. I'm at the end of my tether.

Hammond

Why, what's up?

Leslie

Oh, don't pretend. What's the good of that? Why have you left me all this time without a sign?

Hammond

I've had an awful lot to do.

Leslie

You haven't had so much to do that you couldn't spare a few minutes to write to me.

Hammond

There didn't seem to be any object in taking useless risks. If we don't want a bust-up, we must take certain elementary precautions. We've been very lucky so far. It would be silly to make a mess of things now.

Leslie

Don't treat me like a perfect fool.

Hammond

I say, Leslie darling, if you sent for me just to make a scene, I'm going to take myself off. I'm sick of these eternal rows.

Leslie

A scene? Don't you know how I love you?,

Hammond

Well, darling, you've got a damned funny way of showing it

Leslie

You drive me to desperation.

(He looks at her for a moment reflectively, then, with his hands in his pockets, goes up to her with deliberation.)

Hammond

Leslie, I wonder if you've noticed that we hardly ever meet now without having a row.

Leslie

Is it my fault?

Hammond

I don't say that. I daresay it's mine. But when that happens with two people who are on the sort of terms that we are, it looks very much as though things were wearing a bit thin.

Leslie

What do you mean by that?

Hammond

Well, when that happens, I'm not sure if the commonsense thing is not to say: "We've had a ripping time, but all good things must come to an end, and the best thing we can do is to make a break while we've still got the chance of keeping friends."

Leslie

(Frightened.) Geoff.

Hammond

I'm all for facing facts.

Leslie

(Suddenly flaming up.) Facts! What is that Chinawoman doing in your house?

Hammond

My dear, what are you talking about?

Leslie

Do you think I don't know that you've been living with a Chinawoman for months?

Hammond

Nonsense.

Leslie

What sort of a fool do you take me for? Why, it's the common gossip of the kampong.

Hammond

(With a shrug of the shoulders.) My dear, if you're going to listen to the gossip of the natives . . . .

Leslie

(Interrupting him.) Then what is she doing in your bungalow?

Hammond

I didn't know there was a Chinawoman about. I don't bother much about what goes on in my servants' quarters as long as they do their work properly.

Leslie

What does that mean?

Hammond

Well, I shouldn't be surprised if one of the boys had got a girl there. What do I care as long as she keeps out of my way?

Leslie

I've seen her.

Hammond

What is she like?

Leslie

Old and fat.

Hammond

You're not paying me a very pretty compliment. My head boy's old and fat, too.

Leslie

Your head boy isn't going to dress a woman in silk at five dollars a yard. She had a couple of hundred pounds worth of jewellery on her.

Hammond

It sounds as though she were of a thrifty disposition. Perhaps she thinks that the best way to invest her savings.

Leslie

Will you swear she's not your mistress?

Hammond

Certainly.

Leslie

On your honour?

Hammond

On my honour.

Leslie

(Violently.) It's a lie.

Hammond

All right then, it's a lie. But in that case, why won't you let me go?

Leslie

Because, in spite of everything, I love you with all my heart. I can't let you go now. You're all I have in the world. If you have no love for me, have pity on me. Without you I'm lost. Oh, Geoff, I love you. No one will ever love you as I've loved you. I know that often I've been beastly to you and horrible, but I've been so unhappy.

Hammond

My dear, I don't want to make you unhappy, but it's no good beating about the bush. The thing's over and done with. You must let me go now. You really must.

Leslie

Oh, no, Geoff, you don't mean that, you can't mean that.

Hammond

Leslie, dear, I'm terribly sorry, but the facts are there and you've got to face them. This is the end and you've got to make the best of it. I've made up my mind, and there it is.

Leslie

How cruel. How monstrously cruel, You wouldn't treat a dog as you're treating me.

Hammond

Is it my fault if I don't love you? Damn it all, one either loves or one doesn't.

Leslie

Oh, you're of stone. I'd do anything in the world for you, and you won't give me a chance.

Hammond

Oh, my God, why can't you be reasonable? I tell you I'm sick and tired of the whole thing. Do you want me to tell you in so many words that you mean nothing to me? Don't you know that? Haven't you felt it? You must be blind.

Leslie

(Desperately.) Yes, I've known it only too well. And I've felt it. I didn't care. It's not love any more that seethes in my heart; it's madness; it's torture to see you, but it's torture ten times worse not to see you. If you leave me now, I'll kill myself. *(She picks up the revolver that is lying on the table.)* I swear to God I'll kill myself.

Hammond

(Impatiently.) Oh, don't talk such damned rot!

Leslie

Don't you think I mean it? Don't you think I have the courage?

Hammond

(Beside himself with irritation.) I have no patience with you. You're enough to drive any one out of his senses. If you'd got sick of me, would you have hesitated to send me about my business? Not for a minute. D'you think I don't know women?

Leslie

You've ruined my life, and now you're tired of me you want to cast me aside like a worn-out coat. No, no, no!

Hammond

You can do what you like, and say what you like, but I tell you it's finished.

Leslie

I'll never let you go. Never! Never!

(She flings her arms round his neck, but he releases himself roughly. The touch of her exasperates him.)

Hammond

I'm fed up. Fed up. I'm sick of the sight of you.

Leslie

No, no, no.

Hammond

(Violently.) If you want the truth you must have it. Yes, the Chinawoman is my mistress, and I don't care who knows it. If you ask me to choose between you and her, I choose her. Every time. And now for God's sake leave me alone.

Leslie

You cur!

(She seizes the revolver and fires at him. He staggers and falls. The lights go out, and the stage is once more in darkness.)

Leslie

I ran after him and fired again. He fell, and then I stood over him and I fired and fired till there were no more cartridges.

(The lights go up. Crosbie and Joyce are listening to Leslie's story. She is dressed as at the beginning of the scene.)

Crosbie

Have I deserved this of you, Leslie?

Leslie

No, I have no excuses to offer for myself. I betrayed you.

Crosbie

What do you want to do now?

Leslie

It is for you to say.

Crosbie

How could you, Leslie? The awful part is that, notwithstanding everything—I love you still. Oh, God, how you must despise me. I despise myself. *(Leslie shakes her head slowly.)*

Leslie

I don't know what I've done to deserve your love. Oh, if only I could blame anybody but myself. I can't. I deserve everything I have to suffer. Oh, Robert, my dear.

(He turns aside and buries his head in his hands.)

Crosbie

Oh, what shall I do? It's all gone. All gone.

(He begins to sob with the great, painful, difficult sobs of a man unused to tears. She sinks on her knees beside him.)

Leslie

Oh, don't cry. My dear—my dear.

(He springs up and pushes her on one side.)

Crosbie

I'm a fool. There's no need for me to make an exhibition of myself. I'm sorry.

(He goes hastily out of the room. Leslie *rises to her feet.)*

Joyce

No. Don't go to him. Give him a moment to get hold of himself.

Leslie

I'm so dreadfully sorry for him.

Joyce

He's going to forgive you. He can't do without you.

Leslie

If he'd only give me another chance.

Joyce

Don't you love him at all?

Leslie

No. I wish to God I did.

Joyce

Then what's to be done?

Leslie

I swear to you that I'll do everything in the world to make him happy. I'll make amends. I'll oblige him to forget. He shall never know that I don't love him as he wants to be loved.

Joyce

It's not easy to live with a man you don't love. But you've had the courage and the strength to do evil; perhaps you will have the courage and the strength to do good. That will be your retribution.

Leslie

No, that won't be my retribution. I can do that and do it. gladly. He's so kind and good. My retribution is greater. With all my heart I still love the man I killed.

THE END